The Unanchored Ship Of Theseus

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The Unanchored Ship Of Theseus

by Kari_Kurofai

Summary

Humanity, Kai knows, is a concept. It has nothing to do with the fact that his body is now wires versus neurons, and whether his skin is flesh and blood or if it, well . . . Isn't. He tells himself these things like a mantra, an unanswered prayer every time they lock him away again and leave him to his own devices. It's not like he has anything better to do in the empty cell; there are no windows with which to see the stars beyond, no bed to sleep upon, not that the latter is something he needs anymore. He doesn’t even have a light to see by, his automatic night vision program kicking in when the door shuts and takes the last sliver of it away.

The only thing they've left him with is himself, and by this point Kai isn't even really sure who that is anymore.

Notes

This AU is based on the MV for "Magic," so if you for some reason haven't seen that, you might want to go watch it.

Also, just be aware that I will NEVER write something that doesn't end happily. I'm not an asshole lmao.

More tags will be added as they become relevant.

Anyways, here we GOOOOOOO!

Chapter 1: One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Humanity, Kai knows, is a concept. It has nothing to do with the fact that his body is now wires versus neurons, and whether his skin is flesh and blood or if it, well . . . Isn't. He tells himself these things like a mantra, an unanswered prayer every time they lock him away again and leave him to his own devices. It's not like he has anything better to do in the empty cell; there are no windows with which to see the stars beyond, no bed to sleep upon, not that the latter is something he needs anymore. He doesn't even have a light to see by, his automatic night vision program kicking in when the door shuts and takes the last sliver of it away.

The only thing they've left him with is himself, and by this point Kai isn't even really sure who that is anymore.

He hasn't hit the last step yet, he thinks as he examines his hands in the darkness, folds his fingers in towards his palms to dig his nails into the flesh there. Grim reality sets in as he does it, the realization that he can't feel it even as he breaks the skin sinking into his soul so heavily that, were he still able to breathe, he'd gasp with the weight of it. It can't be too far off at this point, can it. Either tomorrow or the next day, they'll be finished with him, the nanobots will complete the process until he's nothing but cold chrome and empty eyes.

There's no blood when he uncurls his hands, just slim crescent bites in his skin that seal over again in the pitch black of the cell, gone as though they'd never been there at all. Kai watches it happen, what's left of his heart, or whatever approximation of one that's replaced it, settling in his throat. This really is it, isn't it. He's hit the end of the line.

He can't keep clinging to hope anymore.

In the beginning he'd kept track, waiting as the time ticked from days into weeks and then a month. After two, four, *eight* though, he'd stopped counting.

It wasn't likely they'd make the same mistake twice, he knows now. Mistakes are so distinctly human, especially repeated ones. They'd fucked up when they'd captured Beomgyu, made their getaway too slow and their base too easy to find.

They hadn't done the same when they'd taken Kai.

No one is coming for him. Not because they don't want to, not because they're not trying, but because they just simply *can't.* By now, Kai is certain the search for him is as fruitless as finding a single star among the uncountable clusters full in the universe.

He lets go of his hope in the same way he let go of everything else before it. There's a temptation to grasp onto it for awhile longer, but that would only hurt worse than it already

does. So he allows it to slip from his fingers, trickle out of him like a seep of water from the last dregs of a steady, ancient and tired glacier at the end of the world.

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"I'll go," Kai says, unknowing that two words will be all it takes to seal his fate.

Soobin stops pacing the bridge, frozen in place as his eyes lock with Kai's. "What? No, *Kai-ya,* that's not . . ."

Folding his arms over his chest, Kai says, "You don't have a choice. It has to be me. I'm the only one that can hack their systems enough to even try. If Yeonjun-ah goes in alone, he'll be lost, and then where will we be?" This isn't a debate, not really, because they all know that Kai is right. The Gigye ships are too complex to enter blindly, they'll need a guide.

Kai can get them that. After all, the ship they're on now used to belong to the Gigye, too.

"I can take the portable Endolphin program," he insists, "patch it into their system, and get a map. That's it, hyung. Quick, easy."

It's the only way.

Soobin is barely even breathing though, the rise and fall of his ribcage shallow when he says, hoarse and hitched, "And what if it's not easy?"

"We still have to try," Kai pleads.

They have to. *They have to,* they can't just-

"I'm not leaving Beomie."

It's the first time Yeonjun has said anything in minutes, and even as he speaks he doesn't bother to move from where he's taken up root in the abandoned pilot's seat of the deck, his head in his palms. "Make up your minds. *Please,*" he begs, choking on the single syllable. "The longer we wait, the more time we waste, the higher the chance will be that he'll . . ."

"It's a suicide mission," Taehyun says. Like Yeonjun, he's been deathly quiet for awhile, hands balled at his sides as he stares out the wide porthole and the vast sea of the universe beyond it.

It's the wrong thing to say. Yeonjun explodes out of the pilot's seat, red faced and furious as he surges into Taehyun's space and snaps, "Then I die! I don't care! At least if I have Kai-ya there's a *chance!*"

Sometimes, Kai likes to imagine what their lives would have been like had they grown up differently. He wonders what kind of people they'd be, what sort of careers they'd have gravitated to, where they would live.

He remembers the taste of the air after it rained, the sound of the sea, and the carefree feeling of running over playground equipment with Soobin's hand tight in his, and he *aches.*
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They can't be those people, though, those hopeful daydreams of lifetimes they'll never lead already so far lost that thinking of what could have been only serves to hurt them more.

He watches, his heart in his throat, as Soobin crowds between Yeonjun and Taehyun, one arm reaching behind him to tuck the ship's medical officer securely behind him as he spits, "And what if you get caught, too, hyung!?" Yeonjun rears back from him, new fury finding a home in his already wild eyes. "What if this time, *none of you* come back!? You're not fucking expendable!"

Yeonjun's whole body goes tense, "And *Beomgyu-ya* is!?"

"I didn't say that," Soobin hisses between his teeth.

"You implied it!" Yeonjun roars. He shoves forwards, palms slapping harsh to Soobin's chest to push him back, stumble him and Taehyun together with reckless anger. Soobin's grip on Taehyun behind him turns bruisingly tight, and Kai trips forwards to try and help when the blond winces, whatever pained sound he makes lost amidst the yelling. "Fuck you! I'm going even if I have to do it alone!"

"You won't-" Soobin starts, the words shockingly cold, almost a snarl.

"I will!" Yeonjun bites back. "You're not in charge of me, you fucking *asshole-*"

Soobin snags him by the front of his uniform, fingers white knuckled in the green and black fabric. "I am your *captain,*" he reminds darkly.

Kai sees it, the moment the tone sinks in, that commanding tenor that Soobin almost never whips out because they simply don't function like that. Yeonjun goes shockingly still, his eyes wide as they lose their enraged edge. His palms are still braced against Soobin's chest, frozen for a long heartbeat before they curl, a different kind of desperation trembling through him now. No one moves, hell, Kai isn't even sure anyone breathes, a silent tension strung thin in the air before it just, simply, *breaks.*

Yeonjun hitches around an inhale, the only warning any of them get as the noise turns into an unfiltered, wretched sob. His legs fail him first, shaking until they start to give out, the only thing keeping him from meeting the floor Soobin's quick fumble to hold him up. He has to let go of Taehyun to do it, wrapping his arms around Yeonjun's middle as the other man collapses against him. Yeonjun's hands claw at his uniform, his skin, like there will never be enough for him to find purchase, grasping at the fabric of Soobin's top with increasing desperation. "Please," he wails, his agony ringing too loud around the deck of the ship, too palpable. "*Please.* I can't leave him there, Soobin-ah, I *can't!* It's *my fault!*"

Out of all of them, Yeonjun has always loved the fiercest. Before now, Kai had always thought it to be his greatest strength, the depth at which he cares and does so with everything he has in him feeling like a boon. Now, he flinches back from it, struck with muted horror as he realizes that it's *killing him.*

Taehyun tumbles to the floor beside them as Soobin sinks down to the cold metal tiles of the deck, hands flying out to brush Yeonjun's hair from his eyes, find his pulse on his throat.

“Panic attack,” he chokes out hoarsely. “*Hyung* . . . ”

“I’ve got him,” Soobin assures thickly. Kai finally spots the tears that have welled in his eyes, too. “I’ve got him. He’s alright.”

He’s not, Kai thinks, he’s really not. None of them are. Yeonjun is sobbing like he’s being ripped in half, clutching at Soobin like the parting of their bodies will spill him into the icy depths of space beyond the portholes. His whole frame shudders with each too shallow inhale he drags in, the grief in every anguished noise he makes so visceral that it only takes a matter of seconds for Kai to start crying too.

“I’m going,” Kai states again, the affirmation escaping him far weaker than he wishes it would, catching too harshly around his tears. “Yeonjun-ah is right. We can’t- we can’t *leave him.*”

They have to. *They have to.*

They have to at least *try.*

Yeonjun doesn’t say anything, shivering where he’s buried his face in the crook of Soobin’s neck, those thick, awful sobs still wracking through him too hard to speak. So it is that Soobin speaks for him, for all of them, really, the words muffled into Yeonjun’s shoulder. “I can’t lose you, too,” he whispers wetly.

And *oh,* somehow, the thought that all of this could hurt so much more hadn't even crossed Kai’s mind.

He’s always wondered how they’d die, whether the reaper would find them alone or all together. The latter is almost a fantasy at this point, a quiet comfort in their darkest moments if only because none of them can stand the idea of going out any other way. They’ve never talked about it though, that too chilling possibility that reality will catch up to them, tear them down, much more viciously. Not until now at least.

Taehyun is the first to say it, ever the smartest of them, the most steadfast in recognizing the truth when it stares them so starkly in the face. “I’ll stay on the ship,” he says, and Kai doesn’t miss the way his voice wavers. “I’ll stay here with Soobin-ah.”

Kai hates the way Soobin finally lifts his head from Yeonjun’s shoulder, that stricken, awful *knowing* that’s settled into his eyes. “Kai-ya,” he chokes out, but it’s no longer laced with refusal. Instead, it’s just heartbreaking.

Yeonjun grabs for him when Kai kneels down beside him, and Kai goes easily, tangled up in an instant with the whole trembling pile of them. “We’ll bring him back,” Kai swears from where he’s ended up tucked somewhere between Yeonjun’s chest and Soobin’s throat, a hand gripping each of them. “We’ll come home.”

“I’m not much of a pilot,” Taehyun hiccups where he’s leaning heavily into Soobin’s other side, the fingers of a hand gripping tight across the back of Yeonjun’s uniform. “B-but I’ll keep the ship hidden for as long as I can, okay?”

“I am a pilot,” Soobin grits out, “and if you don’t come back, I’ll-”

Kai twists around to grasp him by the side of his neck, drag him down until their noses bump together as he crashes into him as if it’s the last kiss they’ll ever share. “*No* you will *not,*” he growls, biting Soobin’s lower lip as he goes for a second, a third. “If we don’t make it, you *leave.*”

Soobin’s hand flies to his hair, the grip too coarse, and the whimper he lets out the fourth time Kai kisses him is far too telling. Denial. *Regret.*

“You will *run,*” Kai tells him thickly. “You will go back to Meon Jigu. You will *live.* You will *not* fucking ram my god damn ship into a Gigye base and spoil everything we’ve worked for, do you hear me?”

He’s not surprised when Soobin shakes his head, or when he breaks the kiss to do it, the raw and wounded noise he makes going straight through Kai until he’s sure it’ll haunt him until his dying days, no matter how close or distant those might be.

“I’ll stay with him,” Taehyun says again, and this time it rings out as less of a statement, and more of a vow. As if they haven’t already all made so many to each other. “I’ll stay.”

Kai turns to kiss him, too, relief bleeding into the brief press of their lips together. “Thank you,” he breathes.

Someone has to, someone has to be here, to keep Soobin sane, to take him back planetside. And really, there’s no better choice than Taehyun.

“*Kai-ya,*” Yeonjun mumbles against his back, and the cadence of it says enough. They’re both painfully aware of what they’ve just done, of the pact they’ve made simply by talking around it. Neither of them expects to return, and there’s every chance that they won’t.

Kai fumbles around to thread his fingers into Yeonjun’s hair, tip their foreheads together, surety in every stuttered beat of his heart. “I’ll be with you,” he swears. “You and me, okay? We’ll get him out. I promise.”

They’ll get at least that far, Kai resolves, even if the end result is that they’ll go no further. If it’s the last thing he does, Kai refuses to let Beomgyu die alone.

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The portable Endolphin program is truly his greatest work, Kai decides as the hologram shape of her darts ahead of them down the winding halls of the Gigye base. Even built off of only memories of a long gone earth, he’s sure he’s gotten the shape right, the sound as she flips through the air and laughs, every bit like a real dolphin might have. He can hear her even over the blaring of the sirens, see her blue-lit outline clearly despite the flashing alarms all around them.

“Cyborgs ahead!” Endolphin calls out, and Yeonjun grabs Kai around the waist, spinning him round to press him back flat against the nearest wall as he lifts his blaster and fires. He
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doesn't hesitate, though his eyes are shuttered as he finds his marks one right after the other, dropping all three to the floor in quick succession to an answering sputter of sparks. They can't make exceptions this time, can't waste precious minutes trying to disable rather than kill. Desperately, Kai hopes this won't haunt the other man, that in the coming days and months, he won't find himself swallowing around the guilt of having to dispose of their enemies that used to be human.

Assuming they live through this, of course.

That thought alone is what keeps them going, the chase of death so close on their heels with every corner they turn that Kai can practically feel its claws on his neck. Endolphin races ahead, spinning as if this is just another adventure, her tail churning up and down like she's swimming through water. "This way!" she chirps to them. "This way!"

"Why did you program her to be so cheery?" Yeonjun laughs, high and loud, as though there isn't blood on his cheek and they aren't starting to slow from the continued exertion.

"Why not?" Kai grins back.

Now is not the time to be truthful about Endolphin, he knows, though he's tempted to be anyways. He wonders if they'll ever figure it out, the fact that she giggles the same way he does, if they'll one day notice that he's given her every bit of his own knowledge and all of his best traits, the ones that don't drag him down into despair. Kai is only flesh and blood, afterall, mortal down to the very marrow of him. He's flawed, human. Endolphin isn't.

Endolphin will exist even after he's long gone.

They careen around another corner, Yeonjun's blaster already raised on Endolphin's warning. The shot hits the Gigye dead-center in its head, destroying the screen panel that makes up the majority of its face. He shoots again as they pass its limp body on the floor, just for good measure. Even after more than a decade they're not sure what it takes to actually kill them, what will ruin their hardware enough to keep them from just rebuilding, so they don't take chances.

"Right over here!" Endolphin calls, twisting in the air to gesture forwards with her tail. "On the left! Third door down!"

They're almost there when she changes trajectory, surging ahead with a sharp, angry shout. "Reinforcements!" She's incorporeal, but she's fierce, and Kai almost laughs when she charges at the line of cyborgs as if she can actually fight them. They scatter for a second, confused and startled, and Kai doesn't have time to admire the sight as Yeonjun turns to pull him into a tight, telling hug.

"You can open the door, right?" he whispers near Kai's ear, his one handed grip in the back of Kai's uniform bruising.

"Yeah," Kai breathes hoarsely.

Yeonjun sighs. "I'll hold them off for as long as I can."

And that's it. They part, Kai fumbling to touch him one last time, because it might actually be the last, willing his eyes to stay dry as Yeonjun grabs the hand and presses a teasing kiss to the center of his palm before he lets go and disappears down the hall, already firing to the tune of Endolphin's battle cries.

Were this any other day, any other mission, Kai would break open every cell in this damn place. But he *can't* right now, selfishness taking hold of him as he stumbles to find the control panel for the third one.

Everyone always talks big shit, puffs up proud as they swear up and down that they'll put the good of the many over the lives of the few. But that's just not true.

At the end of the day, Kai has a choice to make, and he doesn't hesitate to go through with the one he knows, deep down, is wrong. He doesn't care about the many, he's not here for those souls he doesn't know.

He's here for *Beomgyu.*

Despite his shaking hands, the door slides open, and Kai barely lets himself drink in the sight of familiar dark hair and wide eyes before he falls to the floor and wraps his arms around the other man.

"K-Kai-ya?" Beomgyu chokes out. Every centimeter of him is trembling, involuntary and unbidden, and Kai tugs him closer with a hoarse noise of relief.

He sits back on his heels, cradling Beomgyu's face between his hands as he takes a better look at him. It's only been two days, but that's just long enough that his gaze is already sallow, haunted, and he keeps blinking like he thinks Kai will vanish the next time he does. Someone more elegant than him would probably say something cool right now, boast a grand declaration of love and the endurance of it, but that person is not Huening Kai. What Kai does say is a hitched, wet, "Hey, Beomie," and that's enough.

Beomgyu sobs, a weak, barely there sound, the tiny note of it clearly all he can even muster, and collapses into his arms with a shudder that Kai half fears will break him. "W-why are you *h-here?*" he gasps into Kai's shoulder. "You should h-have *left m-me!*"

Ah. Well, there goes Kai's plan of forging ahead under the false pretense of survival. He smiles grimly at the ceiling of the cell as he starts to haul Beomgyu to his feet. "Never," he mutters. "We would *never, **ever,*** leave you here. Not *ever.*"

The next tremble wracks through Beomgyu's body too harshly, a sharp shout escaping him when Kai tries to stand. "Wait," he whimpers. "W-wait. I *can't.*"

Taehyun is going to murder him, Kai thinks as he lowers them to the floor again, catching a good look at Beomgyu's right leg. Literally the first rule of rescue is to be careful about moving the victim. The white clothes the Gigye have garbed him with don't lend the wound any favors, the awful bruising visible through the sweat-damp fabric of Beomgyu's pants. It's not bleeding, not externally at least, but Kai's not even sure that's a good thing. There's no way he can walk on that, it looks . . .

Well, if they get out of this, he hopes Beomgyu doesn't mind having one less leg.

"S'broken," Beomgyu whispers near Kai's ear, his barely there grip around his shoulders already slipping, too weak. "They- from the inside out- *Kai-ya,* I'm *sorry.*"

Kai swears between his teeth. "It's okay," he returns fiercely. "It's alright. It's just a leg, Beomie. You're fine. I'm going to get you out of here, even if I have to carry you the whole way."

And he will. *He will.*

He shifts so he can get an arm around Beomgyu's waist, the other man's ruined leg between them so he can stand without putting any weight on it. Even without that pressured pain though, he barely manages it, leaning so heavily into Kai's side that Kai instantly knows they won't make it far, not alone. "Come on," he urges, dragging Beomgyu towards the door of the cell and the hall beyond. "Let's go find Yeonjun-ah."

Yeonjun is stronger than him. Yeonjun will get Beomgyu *out.*

Beomgyu's head lolls against Kai's shoulder, his eyes starting to glaze over from the agony of his wound. "Yeonjunie is here?" he mumbles, disbelief weighing down the already slurring syllables.

"Course he is," Kai teases. Without Endolphin, he's guiding their staggered steps just using instinct, following the distant sounds of fighting in a desperate hope they'll somehow lead him home. "You really think he'd let you rot away here? We came running as soon as we could, Beomie."

"S'stupid."

"You're stupid," Kai quips back easily. The alarms are louder ahead, the flashing lights more blinding, but he keeps going forward, around corner after corner as he searches for the only sign of human life in the Gigye base. Assuming he's still alive, of course. Beomgyu's starting to feel too limp in his grip, and Kai pauses to jostle him, fear churning in his gut when it takes the other man a second or two too long to blink his eyes open again and look his way. "Hey, stay with me, okay? Don't you want to see Yeonjun-ah?"

"Yeah," Beomgyu answers, but it's barely audible.

Kai keeps moving forward. "I bet they haven't been feeding you," he goes on. He has to keep Beomgyu talking, keep him awake long enough for Taehyun to save him. "What do you want to eat when we're back on the ship?"

"Not anything you've cooked," Beomgyu mumbles, and Kai laughs.

He's getting heavier, his already dragging steps with his good leg starting to turn listless as he slumps further and further into Kai's side. "What if I make you instant ramyeon?" Kai teases, shaking him slightly again until Beomgyu lifts his head.

"M'favorite."

“I’ll make you as many as you want,” Kai promises. “Like, at least five.”

“*At least,*” Beomgyu snorts weakly.

“Maybe six, if you’re good,” Kai snickers.

Up ahead a cyborg comes flying into view, crashing back against the wall to Kai’s immediate right, and he almost falls over backwards as he struggles to keep Beomgyu out of harms way. “Shit!” he yelps.

“Kai-ya!?”

Yeonjun trips around the corner, blaster still held high, with Endolphin floating just behind him, and Kai has never seen a better sight in his entire life. “*Hyung,*” he gasps.

“What the fuck are you doing here!?” Yeonjun snaps. “You should have gone the other direction!”

Kai winces, tightening his arm around Beomgyu’s waist as he says, “Hyung, he’s *hurt.* I don’t think I can carry him all the way back to the hangar.”

By the way Yeonjun’s whole face twists for a second, he knows Kai is only being half honest with him. “You’re an idiot,” he sighs. “Give him here.”

Beomgyu is almost unconscious when Kai passes him over, sagging between them for a moment that makes Yeonjun start violently cursing, every syllable stricken as he hauls Beomgyu tight against his side. “Fuck, baby bear, come on. You can’t die on me here, not when we came all this way just for you.” He reaches over, hand lightly smacking Beomgyu’s cheek. “BG! Come on, stay with us. We’re almost home.”

It’s such a lie, but Kai doesn’t have the heart to refute it as Beomgyu blinks open bleary eyes to peer at them. “YJ,” he hums as Yeonjun drags his arm around his shoulders for that extra illusion of support. “You’re here.”

“Course I am,” Yeonjun confirms thickly, echoing Kai’s earlier statement. “*Of course I am.* Did you really think I’d leave you?”

Whether or not Beomgyu did, they don’t have time to find out, as Endolphin shrieks out a sharp warning. With Yeonjun’s arms full of their slowly fading partner, Kai fumbles to pull his blaster from its holster at his side. He spins around, finger shaking on the trigger as he comes face to face with a cyborg shambling into sight from the corner, and fires.

It goes down without any fanfare, falling face-first to the tiles on the floor of a hall, not even a hint of blood in its wake.

Kai does not dwell on the fact that it’s his first kill.

“Endolphin!” he snaps.

“Yep!” she chirps back.

“We need another exit,” Kai commands, turning on his heels to help Yeonjun support Beomgyu a little better, get the listless man’s other arm around his shoulders, too. “Once you find one, call the ship there.”

She twirls happily in the air in front of him, all light and endless optimism. “Got it! The best route is on the right side of the base, there’s a bay door with an airlock for the ship to dock against!”

“Lead us.”

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Kai tries to keep count. The Gigye are cowards, the majority of their foot soldiers cyborgs. He should keep count, he figures, so he knows how many enemies who used to be human that he’s forced to take down. It’s the least he can do on such a selfish mission.

He loses track shortly after the number starts to exceed thirty.

Yeonjun tries to help, but his shots are sloppy with Beomgyu leaning so much of his weight onto him, and sloppier still when Kai’s poor marksman skills aren’t quite quick enough to save him from a wound to the shoulder, the trailing line of it smoking and filling the already stale air with the smell of burnt flesh. “I’ll live,” Yeonjun groans when Kai stares at it, stricken by the consequences of his mistake. “It’s fine, Kai-ya.”

It’s not fine, but it’s not like they have any other choice but to keep moving.

Endolphin swims ahead of them, chirping back swift instructions whenever they’re close to ending up surrounded, leading their already winding path further inwards before she manages to find an unguarded hall. “Almost there,” she assures, flipping over to speak to Kai directly, an oddly reassuring smile on her inhuman features despite the fact that Kai knows he didn’t program real emotions into her. “Just a little further.”

“Thank you,” Kai whispers.

He stumbles forward, ducking under Beomgyu’s limp arm again to try and help them go a little faster. His free hand hilts his blaster against his better judgement, and he slips it into his pocket instead, closing his fingers around the little box that contains Endolphin’s portable program core.

Between them, Beomgyu’s gone far too still, too quiet, not even trying to move his good leg anymore. Kai grabs him by the waist, uncaring of any hurt he causes as he jostles him harshly. “Hey!”

Beomgyu jolts, eyes wide for just a second before they start to slip closed once more.

On his other side, Yeonjun sucks in a distinctly terrified sounding breath. “No, BG, baby come on. We’re so close. You’re going to make it.”

Kai thumbs open Endolphin’s box, making apologetic eye contact with her before he lifts it to his mouth and tears the exposed wires open with his teeth. She disappears in an instant, and

he wills himself not to panic. He can see the bay door, the ship waiting for them beyond, they're going to be *fine.*

He yanks down the collar of Beomgyu's white prison garb, and thrusts the sparking box dead center into his bared chest.

Desperately, he hopes the other man's agonized scream isn't the last thing he ever hears from him.

Kai fumbles the box closed again, tripping around to grab Yeonjun by the arm and shove the remains of it unceremoniously into the first pocket he finds on his body. He ignores Yeonjun's confused and horrified sputtering as he rushes towards the bay door, fingers flying over the panel to get it open.

The airlock hisses as it starts to slide back, the trapped oxygen escaping into the rest of the base as Kai's met with the welcoming sight of the ship docked snugly on the other side. It's as beautiful as it ever was, the smooth sheen of it a haven rather than what it used to be before Kai found her and fixed her up. She looks even better out among the stars, swimming sleekly through space as if every day is an adventure rather than a fight for survival. All his best programming went into her, and he knows it'll stay there, relief heavy in his veins as he takes a second he really doesn't have to drink it all in. His Endolphin, carrying all the people he loves most in the world.

Yeonjun has made it to the doorway, stumbling as he steps over the threshold, Beomgyu shaking against his side. "He'll be fine," Kai assures as he swoops their way again, lifting Beomgyu's other arm around his shoulders. "It's just a little shock, enough to keep him awake."

"Hate you," Beomgyu gasps into his shoulder.

"Love you too," Kai grins.

The lock to The Endolphin starts to slide open, but Kai doesn't have time to be happy about it, a shriek clawing its way from his lungs as something hot and sharp goes *right through him.*

He pushes Yeonjun and Beomgyu away from him, forward even as he trips back, a hand flying to his chest to grope at the cloth of his uniform that's already red with blood. Even with the heat of a blaster, a shot like that isn't enough to cauterize everything, and he sucks in a gurgling, copper inhale as he stares down through the hole in the very center of him.

Distantly, he hears Yeonjun's anguished howl of, "*No!*"

Kai lifts his gaze to them, where the pair have stopped just short of the ramp The Endolphin has lowered, just shy of the way to freedom. Beomgyu's eyes are fully open, fear barely keeping him upright now, a hoarse wail tumbling from his lips at the same time Yeonjun makes as if to reach Kai's way.

Time is such a fickle thing.

It stalls and starts, rolls by quickly some days, and drags through others. And yet somehow, there's never enough of it.

That's Kai's last thought as he steps back, back over the threshold of the airlock, back into the Gigye base, blood choking any incompetant goodbyes he could even try to bid. He slams a hand against the control panel, heedless of how it slides off, his palm slick with crimson, because it's enough.

The bay door closes.

He leans his forehead against the glass now separating them, dizzy gaze locked with their helpless ones. What a horrible final memory he's given them, he thinks bitterly, a last longing look as he bleeds out. But he's strangely glad, elated by the thought that it's just him.

If he's dying alone, at least he's the only one.

Kai turns his back to them, already slipping down the door no matter how hard he tries to stay on his feet as he pulls his blaster from its holster. The still blaring alarms are clouding his thoughts, but he strains his ears to listen anyways, waiting for the sounds of The Endolphin taking off. She's so quiet, the rumble of her engines barely filtering through his mind even when they're being revved into full power.

He cocks his blaster up, stares down the Gigye and its cold, uncaring screen looming over him, ignores the barrel being pressed to his skull, and smiles through bloody teeth as he fires.

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The universe operates on dramatic irony.

It doesn't care for any specific individual's pain, and yet it somehow always brings everything back around. Sometimes, it almost feels like there really is a grand scheme, a higher plan, but then reality crashes down and reminds Kai that there isn't.

There is no God.

There are only two truths, life and death, and Huening Kai is no longer privy to participating in either of them. Those gifts were stripped from him, both the joy of living and the peacefulness of the nothingness that comes after.

He is not human when they find him. Hell, he's not even really *there.*

Mere hours after Kai shuts himself down, Beomgyu throws open the door to the cell the same way Kai had done to his so many long months ago.

The universe is cold. The universe is cruel. And the universe definitely thinks shit like this is *fucking funny.*

Kai sees it all from the place he's locked himself in, those last little dregs of all he used to be tethered down inside his own head. He watches Beomgyu grasp his face in his hands, call his name to no answer, watches that spark of hope fade as he feels how cold Kai is beneath his
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palms, how when he presses shaking fingers to the place where a hole used to be in his chest, it doesn't rise and fall with the expansion of lungs that are, technically, no longer there.

"No," Beomgyu chokes, tears welling in his eyes so quickly that Kai wishes he could wipe them away. "No, no, *no,* ***no.*** Kai-ya, *please no.*"

But Kai doesn't have any reassurances to give him, even if there was enough left of him to speak at all. He's not human.

He's not alive.

Beomgyu sobs, pushing aside Kai's arms that he'd left curled over his knees when he'd shut down, shoving at his legs, parting them so he can scramble to hold him. He doesn't seem to care that Kai's skin isn't warm, the other man burrowing his whole body against his as if proximity is enough to erase all those days and weeks of careful reconstruction. If only it could be that fantastical, Kai thinks distantly, wistfully. A year ago, he probably would have insisted it could be. There's so much still they don't know about the universe, who's to say, he'd have boasted, that love alone isn't that powerful? Maybe fairytales are just as real as aliens turned out to be.

He's glad, suddenly, that he shut down before they got here. There's no way he'd be able to bear this otherwise, the palpable grief, the lingering hope, it's too much.

Somewhere deep inside, Kai still breaks anyways.

"We're going home, Kai-ya," Beomgyu chokes out against his shoulder, hands tight where he's fisted them at the back of Kai's white clothes. "I'm taking you home."

He shouldn't, Kai thinks, but he can't even tell him that, either.

Kai curls further back into himself, crawls away from all sight and sound to collapse in the darkest corners of his consciousness, and weeps.

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There's a hand on his cheek. Kai can just faintly make out the pressure of it, the feel of four fingers, a thumb, the latter occasionally wandering over the planes of his face, feeling out the metal beneath the silicone that would have once been called a bone.

After awhile he can tell that it's not just one. There are different hands, broad, thin, heavy, light, all their touches gentle when they fit against him. Sometimes they stroke through the fibers on his head that imitate hair, carding his bangs back from his closed eyes, brushing along his brows and settling around his jaw. They come and go, lingering for a moment or brushing by, fleeting, as if their owner can't stand staying too long. Kai doesn't blame them.

He shifts in and out of awareness just like that. Most of the time he feels like he's floating, caught in some no longer existing sea, washed in and out from shore by windswept waves. Every now and then he thinks he catches words, someone speaking, but he can't cling to
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them long enough to be certain. Everything is so faded, so far away, and he's not even sure he wants to find solid ground.

Distantly, he remembers what he is, and when he does he lets himself be tugged back under again.

He can't wake up.

In his years aboard The Endolphin, he'd pulled hundreds of tracking chips out of people that had only had the first steps of the process started on them. He and Taehyun had worked out a system, a scale of who they'd be able to save, and who they wouldn't. There's a very fine line between just in time, and too late, and Kai crossed over it months ago.

If he wakes up, the Gigye will find the ship. If he lets himself give in to how badly he wants to open his eyes, he'll doom them all.

This is enough, he tells himself. Those soft, careful touches that trail over him. It's enough. Soon, they'll realize he's a lost cause, jettison him out into space, and maybe then he'll be at peace. It won't be death, but Kai can't complain about the idea of seeing the stars forever, slowly drifting away through whatever galaxy they're in. It will almost be like being asleep.

"Kai-ya."

It happens all at once, like someone's dumped him into a tub of ice. One second, Kai is blissfully accepting of his fate, and the next he's standing somewhere dark as Endolphin sparkles into glorious life in front of him.

His breath catches, even though he doesn't need to breathe. She's just the way he left her, when he'd carelessly ripped the wires of her portable little heart out to save Beomgyu's life. The shadows around them are nothing to her, and she laughs as she flips through them, swimming circles around him before she leaps in one long, glorious arc over his head.

"Kai-ya!"

Oh, he's *missed her.*

"Hi," he manages weakly, his hands already reaching out for her even though he knows they can't touch. She's just energy and light, after all, a hologram.

He freezes as his fingers brush against something that feels distinctly solid.

What?

She twirls between his hands, tail flapping up and down, back and forth as she nuzzles into his palms. "Oh, this is nice!" she exclaims. "Now you can pet me, since we're the same!"

Something heavy, cold, settles uncomfortably in Kai's stomach. Grief tastes a little different every time it finds him. On his best days, it's just a scratch, a lingering soreness. But sometimes, like now, it rushes through him so fast and fierce that it *aches.*

He tries not to dwell on it. “How are you?” he asks, deciding to go for general niceties first.

“Great, now that you’re back!” she chirps. He’s not offended when she pulls away to start circling around him again, far from it. “And I’ll be even better once you wake up!”

Kai pauses, blinks, and turns to stare at the darkness around him. Ah. That makes sense. “I’m not awake,” he whispers, a little annoyed that he didn’t immediately figure that crucial detail out by himself. And then, “Fuck.” He twists around to where she’s stopped to watch him, suspended upside-down at eye level. “*Fuck!* Endolphin! Tell me they didn’t patch you into me!”

Endolphin just stares back at him.

Oh *no.*

“Then I will not tell you,” she says primly after a moment of thought.

Kai grabs her, grateful that he can do so now and heedless of the way she just giggles when he snags her around the middle. “Leave!” he snaps. “Leave right now! You can’t stay! You can’t let the Gigye get ahold of your program!”

To his horror she doesn’t immediately obey, merely continuing to look at him with her round eyes. What the fuck. *What the fuck?*

Weakly, Kai asks, “Endolphin. Who’s the master of your program?”

“Choi Soobin,” Endolphin answers immediately, as if it’s obvious.

Kai’s heart sinks.

He can’t make her go. She won’t listen to him. It makes sense, of course. They wouldn’t leave the ship’s mainframe under control of a person who wasn’t there. Someone had to take care of her, and it’s not like Kai could have.

This is bad. This is *so bad.*

“I can’t wake up,” he tells her, desperately hoping she’ll listen. Maybe she’ll relay it back to Soobin, too. “I’m basically finished. I’m not human anymore, there’s no way you can get the tracking chip out of me without tearing out something vital.” They’re made that way on purpose, a built-in self destruct method, of sorts. Either you work for the Gigye, or you’re obsolete.

Infuriatingly, Endolphin meets this information with a blink. “Okay,” she says, her deadpan tone making him bristle. “I’m not taking your chip out, though.”

Uh . . . “Then what are you doing?” Kai asks, entirely unsure if he even wants to know at this point.

He takes a half step back, as if doing so matters when he’s trapped in the void of his own mind, and she circles him again to dart up close to his face, her snout right beside his ear like

she's conveying a secret when she chirps, "I'm frying it!"

That's . . . Not possible. Is it? "How?" Kai hears himself ask, furious in an instant as something that feels faintly like hope bubbles to life inside him. Fuck, he knows better by now. He shouldn't . . .

"I don't think I could do it for anyone else," Endolphin explains, leaping overhead again. "But you already know me, so you accepted me without question." Of course he did, he *made her.* "Captain Soobin says it's all up to me! Do you want to try?"

Kai has never wanted anything *more.*

Still, he hesitates. "If this works, the Gigye won't be able to find me, right?"

"Right!"

"Which means they- they can't *control me,* right?" he whispers.

Endolphin laughs, as if any of this is funny and not infinitely terrifying. "Right!"

This is the stupidest thing he's ever done, Kai decides. If it fails, the Gigye won't hesitate to destroy the ship, and everyone in it. For some reason he'll never comprehend, Kai breathes out, "Let's do it," against his better judgement.

It's so stupid. It's so fucking stupid. He's going to get everyone *killed.*

But for just a second, Kai wants to be selfish.

He opens his arms for Endolphin, and she trills when she swims forward to collide with him, wiggling happily in his embrace. She returns it the best she can, with her stubby little flippers around his middle as she declares, "Counting down! Ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Kai mutters, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Three! Two! One!"

It *hurts.* If you'd asked Kai five minutes ago if he could still feel pain, he'd have replied with a vehement no. But apparently, that would have been a lie. Even getting shot in the chest hadn't hurt this much, and that had just about killed him.

He screams, the white-hot agony coursing through what little is left of him, vicious and sharp and overwhelming, and then he blacks out.

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When he was human, Kai would wake up slowly. Despite usually being the earliest to rise, he'd do so at a snail's place, squirming around to tangle himself closer to whoever was in bed with him, relishing in the warmth for long, long minutes until he could convince himself to start his day.
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This time, Kai wakes up all at once.

He sits up straight with a jolt, like a god damn monster rising from its slab, back and limbs stiff as his eyes fly open. His head knocks roughly against something, but he barely even feels it, too busy being dazed by the iridescent lights all around him, the cacophony of sudden sound. It's all too abrupt, too loud, too bright, and he lifts his hands to clamp them over his ears as his eyes squeeze shut again, a whine tumbling from his lips.

Someone touches his arm.

Even through the muffle of his palms, Kai can hear the person calling his name, the pressure on his silicone threatening to bruise if it had still been skin. But he can't open his eyes, can't listen, too overwhelmed by the shock of being conscious again to even try.

"Kai-ya! *Kai-ya!*"

Everything goes quiet.

Just like waking up, it happens suddenly. The blare of medical machines halt, the voices stop, and Kai isn't human enough for his ears to ring as it all fades away. Small miracles, he thinks bleakly as he slowly draws his hands back from his head and tries to blink open his eyes.

The room is dark, the only illumination coming from somewhere out of Kai's line of sight. He swallows, a useless, old habit that no longer means anything, as his night vision flicks on.

He's in the med bay of The Endolphin, recognition instantly stirring through his mind as he spots the familiar layout; the cluster of life saving machines off to one side, thankfully not in use, the line of beds, the stupid motivational posters he and Taehyun had tacked onto the walls years ago when someone they'd rescued had commented that the space was too dreary. One of the beds is occupied, of course, the one he's currently sitting on. They've even covered him with a blanket, as if that's going to do him any good, and there's some kind of node attached to his wrist, the wires of it leading away to a panel Kai doesn't recognize.

Soobin is standing in front of him.

His gaze is searching as he stares down at him, and Kai instinctively flinches back from it, terrified of what he'll see, what he'll find. They must know already, right? There's no way they don't. If Soobin is looking for some speck of humanity left in him, he's not about to find it.

"Kai-ya," Soobin whispers, so *so* softly that Kai almost doesn't even hear him at all. His hand is still on Kai's upper arm, vicelike. "Kai-ya, do you know who I am?"

Oh.

Oh. Of course they would think that. The only thing separating him from a cyborg right now is those few fine, finishing touches; the chromatic skin, the memory loss.

For the first time, Kai finds himself wondering why they kept his mind intact as much as they did for so long, and an awful, visceral dread curls in him. "My chip," he starts weakly,

terrified.

“Fried,” Soobin assures. “It’s gone, Kai-ya. They’re not going to find you. Not *ever*.”

He can’t promise that, Kai realizes as panic takes hold of every fibre of him. That’s not something any of them can guarantee. What if the chip fixes itself the way Kai’s silicone skin does? What if they get in a firefight with the Gigye, and just being close enough reboots it? What if Kai gets captured? They’ll finish him off, put that last injection of nanobots into his system until he has no free will, no choice. He’ll be trapped in his own body that’s been replaced piece by piece, forced to watch himself kill everyone he loves and-

“Is he having a panic attack?” Soobin whispers.

“Um, no?” another voice answers back, audibly confused. “He doesn’t . . . Have the capability to have that. Not physically at least.”

Kai hates the way Soobin breathes out a low, anguished sound.

“I checked him over,” the second voice goes on, and Kai finally registers that it must be Taehyun. *Fuck,* it’s been *so long.* “He doesn’t . . . Soobin-ah, he doesn’t have real lungs. Or a heart. Or . . . Blood. He can’t have a panic attack.”

They both fall silent, and Kai curls in himself, fisting his fingers in his faux hair as the terror coils tighter and tighter, threatening to consume him.

“I think he’s having a panic attack,” Soobin says, sure this time. The hand on Kai’s arm tugs, and Kai gasps uselessly as he’s tumbled forwards into his chest.

It probably hurts, Kai figures as he falls, cyborgs aren’t exactly light, a standard body size like Kai’s usually averaging out at around a little less than ninety kilograms. But if he’s heavy, Soobin doesn’t flinch away from it, merely shifting around until he can wrap one arm across Kai’s shoulders, the other around his middle, and pull him that much closer.

Kai doesn’t need to breathe, but he opens his mouth as if he does anyways, certain he must look like a stranded fish while he instinctively tries to gulp down a steadying breath. There’s a third hand in the middle of his back, stroking carefully over his cold spine, and he shivers as if he can feel the chill of it, too. “Maybe it is a panic attack,” Taehyun says lowly, uncertainly, his palm pressured as it settles between Kai’s shoulder blades. “He’s *shaking.*”

He wants to touch, Kai realizes with a new wash of fear, desire overwhelming him for a moment as he fumbles to grasp at Soobin’s uniform, tangle his fingers in the fabric even though he knows he shouldn’t. Why would anyone want him to touch them now?

It only makes Soobin hold him tighter, a choked, stricken sound escaping him when Kai moves to cling to him in turn. “I’ve got you,” he murmurs fiercely, hitched and wet. “You’re alright now, Kai. You’re home. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Kai wishes he could believe him.

He can't stop shaking, trembles rippling through him in intervals he can't control. All his old methods for calming down won't work, they're meant for *living* things , not whatever Kai is now. He can't catch a breath, can't slow a heart that isn't there. All that's left of him, it seems, is *emotion,* the surge of it too loose and wild for him to quell.

Soobin must realize that too, because a moment later he hisses, "What do I do?"

Taehyun's reply is far too honest. "I don't know," he says, strangely even. "It's not like I have any experience with this."

It's a carefully tactful response, Kai recognizes, dodging around the horrible truth of the matter. Taehyun's expertise lies with human beings, obviously. Which Kai very decidedly isn't anymore.

Self deprecatingly, Kai wishes he would just say that.

Soobin seems unsatisfied with the answer too, because he just holds Kai that much closer, one of his hands tangling into his hair. "I wouldn't bring you here if I didn't think I could save you," he swears near Kai's ear, petting over his head. Kai wonders if he knows how little sensation the motion brings, that that vague press of pressure is all he has to even know it's happening. "I wouldn't wake you up if I thought it would get the others killed."

Liar, Kai thinks. He's such a fucking liar.

For some reason, he almost believes him anyways.

The truth, he knows, is darker. They'd all come to the decisions that lead them to this moment together. At some point during those months, Yeonjun and Beomgyu and Soobin and Taehyun had weighed their lives on a scale, and decided this risk was worth it.

Kai can't fault them for it, either. Not when they'd done the same for Beomgyu.

Even after all this time, the result is the same. All of them together. None of them alone.

If he could cry, Kai would. Something in him tries to anyways, a noise as close to a sob as he'll ever manage again ringing in the air as he wriggles further into Soobin's embrace. As if he can somehow warm himself up if he's held long enough. As if he'll only be able to take a breath again if they're so tangled up that they forget where one of them starts and the other one ends.

The bed dips behind him, and Kai hiccups on another helpless noise as Taehyun's arms wrap around him from behind. "*Oh, Kai-ya,*" he whispers, his earlier even tenor quivering apart. "Everything's okay, you're *home.*"

They're just words, Kai knows, little platitudes that simply aren't true. Kai will, unfortunately, never be okay again.

His last thought before he slips under once more is that he hopes they understand that, too.

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When he wakes up once more, Kai is alone.

He sits up slowly this time, a hand lifting to his head as if to rub sleep from his eyes before he remembers that he doesn't have to. He wasn't asleep. He can't sleep. He'd shut down.

Briefly, he wonders if he'd done that to himself, or if Taehyun had figured out how to do it for him. He sort of wishes it were the latter. It would be good if the others had a way to turn him off if they ever need to, just in case.

The room is still dark, the only lightsource a little table lamp that's tucked on the far side of the room on Taehyun's cluttered desk. The machine next to Kai's bed is on, but he can't make heads or tails of the readings from this side of the glass, so he stops trying, turning instead to fiddle with the node attached to his arm. He wonders what it measures, considering he has no vitals to speak of, or even brainwaves, really. His consciousness is part of some sort of harddrive now, he's pretty sure. Part of him is tempted to pick it off, if only because it seems unnecessary, but he figures that it's probably hooked up to some kind of warning system, and he doesn't really want someone to come running to check on him right now.

"Endolphin?" he whispers into the gloom.

She whirls into existence in front of him in an instant, appearing as a spinning formation, a dusting of light particles. He grins despite himself.

Inside the confines of the ship, she's only a third the size of her full, lifelike model, small enough for him to cup his hands under her body as if he's holding her, the lines of her hologram shifting through his fingers. "I guess we can't touch anymore," he sighs, as relieved as he is oddly sore. It had been nice while it lasted.

"Not here," Endolphin agrees, which is so cryptic that Kai really doesn't want to examine it further right now, lest it send him spiraling again. "You're awake again!"

"How long was I out?"

"A week!"

Oh, geeze.

Kai glances around the shadowed room again, slightly less surprised now that no one else is there. "What time is it?" he whispers. "Late?"

It's not like time is real out in space. There's no sun to revolve around, no real days to count with the rise and fall of it. But the ship has its own clock that they go by, a traditional twenty-four hours ticking past in mimicry of a planet long gone.

"It's 02:17!" Endolphin chirps.

Yeah, he figured as much. There's probably someone still awake, but he doesn't want to bother them, so Kai falls silent rather than ask her.

The last thing he wants to be now is a burden.

He lets his palms drop out from under her, shooing at her with his fingers until she starts swimming in the air around him, leaping through invisible waves and spiraling over his head in languid loops. His eyes scan the room again, the low greens of his night vision picking up little details he hadn't noticed before. Taehyun's desk is even messier than usual, littered with charts and glass tablets, a few of which have cracks across the screens. The chair tucked beneath it is new, a soft looking brown rather than the black one Kai remembers, and he blinks as he spots the old one crumpled into a corner.

The back of it has been broken off, the plastic snapped in half at the flexible neck, and one of its wheels is gone. It looks, if he's not mistaken, like someone had thrown it against a wall, or maybe even the floor.

The other beds are still empty, thankfully, or they seem to be at first glance. Kai tries to hitch in a breath, a soundless, futile little thing, as he registers that something small and familiar is tucked into the bed closest to the desk.

It's his Molangie.

Even at this distance, Kai recognizes it, the faded gray fabric, the lumpy, loved on shape, and he swallows around nothing as he's struck by the sudden, inexplicable rush of *want.*

He ignores Endolphin's alarmed little squawk as he pries the node off his wrist and stumbles across the room to scoop it up into his arms.

For the first time, he's glad the Gigye left him with his sense of smell. It's not much, so faint that he barely even notices it most of the time. He thinks it must be some kind of system preservation thing, meant to warn him if there's a fire or another similar problem, but right now he's not using it for the purpose it was designed for. Kai buries his face against the plush toy, sucking in another stupid, useless breathy sound, as if his nose isn't merely connecting tiny molucules and cataloging them in whatever he has that passes for a brain these days.

It smells human.

He recognizes the scent of sweat, of dust, of the detergent they use to wash all their clothes while on the ship. If he closes his eyes, he can convince himself there's more; a tickle of one of Yeonjun's perfumes, a hint of the shampoo Kai used to share with Soobin, a sting of antiseptic wipes, the woodsy taste of an old guitar.

A shudder wracks its way through his body, and Kai chokes on something too close to a sob again.

"Someone's coming to check on you, Kai-ya," Endolphin says near his ear.

Much too belatedly, Kai remembers that he ripped the node off his arm, and he jolts back to himself in startled alarm as the door to the med bay hisses open.

The hallway beyond is all lit up, kept bright even in the middle of the night, and Kai flinches away from the beam of it that gets cast across the floor and up onto him, curling further around the battered plush.

“You’re awake.”

It’s Taehyun, of course, this is his workspace after all, and Kai wilts as he watches out of the corners of his eyes when he presses a palm to the panel and slides the door closed behind him, enveloping them in the safety of relative darkness again. He stands there for a long second, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his lab coat that’s barely even rumpled on his shoulders. Kai wonders if he’s slept. Taehyun’s gaze shifts around the room, over Kai, the plushie, then to where Endolphin is floating at his shoulder. One of his eyebrows arches. “You’ve been up for awhile?”

“. . . Sorry,” Kai whispers, unsure of what else he’s meant to say. He hugs the plush to him a little tighter, half scared all of a sudden that Taehyun might try to take it away.

His fear must be obvious, if the way Taehyun’s muted expression morphs into one of palpable dismay is anything to go by. One of his hands rises from his pockets, “Hey,” he soothes, “it’s alright. You can keep it. It’s yours after all.”

Stubbornly, Kai grips the worn little thing that much tighter, even though he’s not quite sure that statement’s true. The last time he’d touched Molangie he’d been flesh and blood, a beating heart and breathing lungs. Now he’s none of those things. He can’t even feel its fur, the only reason he can even confirm it’s in his arms at all the fact that it holds a barely-there amount of weight that his systems pick up on.

He watches through wary eyes as Taehyun approaches him with both hands held out, as if he’s trying not to spook a flighty horse. It would almost be funny, if Kai weren’t so terrified.

“Please don’t shut down again,” Taehyun begs.

Well, that answers a few of his questions. No one turned him off, at the very least. Kai had done it to himself. He grimaces, pressing a cheek to Molangie again as he looks at Taehyun. “Wouldn’t that be for the best?” he says before he can think it through.

He hates the way Taehyun’s mouth drops open, the visible furrow of his brows when he says hoarsely, “Kai-ya, *no*.” It only takes him three quick strides to cross the room, a deep frown marring his face when Kai tries to take a step back, and he stops just short of touching him, his hand hesitating centimeters from Kai’s shoulder. “. . . You’re scared of me,” he whispers, realization flashing across his features in awful clarity. Kai buries his face in Molangie once more.

Kai wishes, with everything he has left, that that wasn’t true. “It’s not you specifically,” he mutters, as if that somehow makes it any better.

He tenses as Taehyun’s palm settles around his shoulder, but he doesn’t shy away from it. Though whether that’s from fear locking him in place, or an actual want of the touch, he doesn’t know. Taehyun’s thumb strokes over him through the fabric of the soft blue medical gown Kai’s just now noticed he’s wearing, relief heavy inside him as it sinks in that one of the first things they must have done after getting him back was strip those horrible, Gigye whites from his body. “I’m not going to hurt you,” Taehyun says, sounding every bit as if he’s not sure Kai knows that. He does though, *he does*. “Can you come back to your bed?”

“Are you going to hook that thing up to me again?” Kai asks into Molangie’s mushed little form.

“Yes,” Taehyun admits reluctantly. “It shows me your vitals, I’ve been using it to make sure you’re alright.”

Huh?

Kai lifts his head, just a bit, just enough to peer at him in confusion. “I don’t have vitals,” he states stiffly.

Taehyun huffs out an annoyed breath. “Yes you do. You still have parts that move, Kai-ya, electrical pulses and drives that keep you going. Come back to your bed, I’ll show you.”

His feet drag as he follows Taehyun to the other side of the room, watching through hooded eyes as the other man spins the glass screen around for him to see properly. There’s no movement on it anymore, since Kai tore the node off, but the indicators are still bright on its surface, boxes for all the things Taehyun has been monitoring. “This one,” Taehyun says, indicating the display on the top right, “is what we’re pretty sure are your thoughts. It’s the only one that’s stayed completely active even while you were shut down. That’s how we knew you were alive when Beomgyu-ya and Yeonjun-ah brought you back to the ship.”

Kai doesn’t bother to refute the use of the word “alive.”

“This one,” Taehyun goes on, moving to the box just below the first, “seems to be what I’m going to go ahead and call your synapses, for lack of a better term. You’re basically constantly thrumming with electricity, though it slows down *a lot* when you’re powered off, almost to nothing. And this one,” he points to the second to last box, the largest one, “Is your motor functions. It lets me know when you’re actually moving. Finally,” he taps towards the one on the bottom left. “Your signal. That’s dead. It was offline when you arrived, probably because you’d preemptively shut down, almost like you were running on reserve energy. And now it’s gone for good.”

Kai stares at the screen, mutely holding out his arm when Taehyun peels open a new node and starts attaching it to the machine. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. It hasn’t been functioning the entire time.” He slaps the node to Kai’s wrist, rubbing it soundly into place just above where he would have once felt for a pulse. “We wouldn’t have taken you aboard otherwise,” he states.

This time, Kai doesn’t hold back his wash of doubt. “You’re lying,” he whispers.

He’s not surprised when Taehyun lifts his head to look for him, steady as their gazes lock for a long, heavy beat before he says without a hint of remorse, “Yeah. I am.”

“So I *was* putting out a signal,” Kai snaps, horrified as he pulls his arm back against his side, clutches Molangie to his chest tighter.

Taehyun has the gall to laugh. It's a tiny sound, hardly more than a rough exhale, but Kai hears it anyways. "No, you weren't. I wasn't lying about that," he huffs. "I meant the other thing. About us bringing you here even if you had been. That definitely wasn't true."

Kai grimaces. "That's really stupid of you."

"Probably," Taehyun agrees with a roll of his shoulders. "But you weren't here, Kai-ya. We were . . ." He hesitates, and Kai doesn't like the shadow that so easily settles in his eyes, weighted and quiet, aching with something Kai unfortunately knows too well. "We were falling apart," he confesses, the cadence oddly clinical, even for him. "A year is such-"

"A *year?*" Kai croaks.

He thought he'd been keeping better track than that, certain that he'd been gone eight, maybe ten months, not twelve.

Taehyun blinks, arms folding over his chest. "Close to it. I think we were drawing up on a little over three-hundred and twenty days when we finally found you, and then you were more or less comatose for another five weeks after that before Soobin-ah finally figured out how to hook you up to the portable Endolphin."

Five weeks. He's already been back on the ship for *five weeks.* Six, if he counts the fact that he shut down again after first waking up. "And the Gigye haven't come after you at all?"

The snort Taehyun lets out says a lot, actually. "Oh no, they were up our ass for about half of that before Beomgyu-ya finally managed to shake them off our tail. You missed all the fun," he twirls a hand through the air between them, sarcasm etched into his every feature. "So many fucking barrel rolls."

Kai jumps as Endolphin soars back into his line of sight, flipping loop-de-loops around Taehyun's extended fingers. "So many!" she chirrs.

Taehyun flicks his wrist towards her, "Of course you'd like that," he chides fondly. "What do you have to say about the constant drops in and out of hyperspace?"

She sags immediately, tail drooping as she mutters, "Too hard on the engines. Tired."

Kai extends a palm for her, gladdened when she doesn't even hesitate to swim over it. "Are you still tired?"

"Nope!" Endolphin chirps immediately. "We're safe now! I've had lots of rest!"

A smile, almost unbidden, spreads slowly across Kai's face. "Good," he whispers. "I'm glad." It stays in place as she whoops, somersaulting up his arm to flash just below his chin and then around his head.

It takes him a minute to notice the way Taehyun is staring at him, too distracted by the hologram of his program spinning above them to pay attention. When he catches sight of it though, everything in him locks up again, uncertainty roaring through him as he clutches Molangie tight against his chest. He's never seen a look quite like that before, and he can't

get a read on it no matter how hard he tries. There's something too open about it, naked, especially for Taehyun, the least likely of all of them to ever wear his heart on his sleeve. His eyes are wide, the furrow of his brows so deep there's a crease between them, his lips parted around a breath he doesn't take. If Kai didn't know better, he'd say he was hurt somewhere, but a quick look of his own pings in his mind that Taehyun is just fine, all human body, human heart, not an injury on him.

Something in the air snaps when he speaks, a brittle, already cracking thing, the audible hitch in Taehyun's voice when he gasps out, "*Kai-ya,*" tugging at every heartstring Kai no longer has.

He doesn't move away when Taehyun fumbles for him, frozen in place and stunned as shaking arms wrap around his shoulders. The other man's whole body shudders, a fragile ripple that starts in his chest and spreads outwards until he's trembling all over. He slumps bodily against Kai's front, and were Kai not made of all the stern, metal stuff he is now, he'd probably stumble back from the abrupt weight it puts on him when Taehyun buries his face against the crook of his neck.

Molangie is squished between them, but Kai can't bring himself to care as he drops his hold on the plush to lift cautious hands and fold them around Taehyun's middle. "Taehyunie . . ." he whispers, unsure of what else to say. He doesn't know what broke all of a sudden, what that tense thing that had been in the air even was before it was gone. It must be the right thing to say though, because Taehyun *sobs,* stepping even closer, heedless of how doing so knocks Molangie to the floor.

"*Kai-ya,*" he chokes into Kai's shoulder. "***Kai-ya****,* I *missed you.*"

Oh.

Kai blinks at the monitor behind him, at the rise and fall of his so-called vitals on the screen. "I missed you too," he says weakly, the words hitching even though he has no breath for them to trip over. One of the lines, the one on the top right, flares higher. "I- I missed you *so much.*"

That was all he'd had, locked away in that dark cell; missing people. In the end, he's pretty sure that was all that kept him sane, the distant knowledge that he might be missed in turn leaving that fruitless hope burning for far longer than it should have.

Maybe it wasn't so fruitless after all, though. He's here now, isn't he? Sort of?

He can't feel Taehyun's warmth as they cling together, can't feel the tears he knows are dripping down over his silicone skin, can't feel anything but the faint pressure of the shaking hands against his back. Huening Kai is not made of the same stuff he was when he left, not a single atom of him untouched or organic.

Humanity is, at its core, a concept though, he tells himself as he pulls Taehyun ever closer, holds him as if he's the gravity spinning at the center of the galaxy, and letting go will send Kai flying into the pits of a black hole. He is not made human by the parts he does or doesn't have, but perhaps he can claim it again with what he's been left with.

There is every chance, he thinks fiercely as he presses his forehead to Taehyun’s shoulder, chases the distant thrum of the other man’s heart when he settles a palm over his back, that fairytales are real, too. And maybe that’s a stupid thought, a foolish idea, a wish that will die unspoken, but he grasps onto it anyways.

Chapter End Notes

If you've enjoyed the fic so far, please leave a comment! Comments fuel my writing, which means more content!

Chapter 2: Two

Chapter Summary

> Taehyun’s fixed his professional expression back into place, his lips pursed thin when he replies, “I'm telling you, as your doctor, that this is against your best interests.”
>
> Kai forces on a smile he doesn’t feel, even proverbially, “And since when have I ever listened to doctor’s orders?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first course of action, Kai decides, is figuring out exactly what he is and isn't capable of. Which means he spends two whole days getting thoroughly x-rayed and cut open. The latter is his idea, insisting multiple times that it would be fine before he'd finally just grabbed one of the scalpels off the tray and sliced it up his own arm, showing Taehyun first-hand how the silicone skin would knit back together.

Still, laying back while someone is, quite literally, holding his chest cavity open is quite the, uh . . . Experience.

"Feels weird," Kai mutters as he fixes his gaze on the ceiling.

Taehyun freezes, one hand still definitely somewhere in Kai’s ribs. "Um . . ."

"Metaphorically," Kai hastily amends. "*Metaphorically.* It doesn’t really actually feel like anything."

The frown Taehyun gifts him with would be amusing, if it weren’t so deathly serious. "Nothing? As in, nothing at all? You don't have any sensation?"

Kai would shrug were it not for the literal hand groping around his cybernetic heart. "I mean, I can sort of feel some things. Like, I know where I'm being touched, and how much pressure is being placed on that area. And if I'm holding something, I know more or less what it weighs. But that’s it. It’s more like . . . Like my sensors are telling me what's there rather than an actual feeling."

He figures Taehyun can fill in the blanks himself, and he watches the way his expression shifts from clinical to stricken. "So . . . Nothing, then," he surmises grimly.

Kai forces a smile onto his face,"Ah, who needs pain anyways."

Taehyun squints down at him. "Everyone, actually," he intones before he looks away again, leaning over to peer at something in Kai's midsection that Kai doesn't really want to think about. "Pain lets you know when something is wrong. And also," he adds, a tad quieter, "without pain you can't have . . ."

Yeah. Nope. No. They're not going to go there, not now and maybe not ever.

"Taehyunie," he says through the still plastered on faux smile, "please don't finish that sentence."

Kai has already lost so much, and hearing aloud the full magnitude of what he knows deep down isn't going to do him any favors. He's already mourned it enough, jagged thoughts circling round and round the awful truth of the matter. Dwelling on it any more than he has to will only make it hurt worse.

He's grateful, then, when Taehyun neither finishes what he was trying to say, nor offers him any useless platitudes. There's no point in apologizing for something that, quite simply, Kai can no longer have.

What Taehyun does decide to say, though, after a minute of uncomfortable silence, still breaks Kai's god damn poor excuse for a heart. "I'm glad you're here, you know," he whispers.

Grief claws heavily at Kai's throat. "Yeah," he returns, choked despite the absurd impossibility of it. "Yeah, me too."

At the very least he has that to cling to. He'll take being home over going mad in the darkness of that cell, even if it means he had to sacrifice everything else to do it.

Still, Taehyun's face is so . . . He's good at it, trying to school his expressions, and Kai figures that he probably manages to fool a lot of people that way. Not him, though, they know each other too well. Kai can see past all the feigned lines of professionalism, finds those little tells, the way Taehyun starts blinking too much, the tremble that fades and resurfaces again in the corners of his mouth as he stubbornly tries to wrestle himself into composure. Tentatively, Kai extends a hand towards him, fingers spread. "Hey," he soothes. "You dropped something."

Taehyun blinks, harder this time, and Kai watches as tears well in his eyes before he shakes his head and wipes them away on the sleeve of his lab coat. "S-stupid," he hiccups as he takes Kai's hand in his. "You just said you can't even feel stuff like this."

Kai presses their palms together. "I can feel the weight," he reminds softly. "And the pressure," he teases, "if you wanna give it a squeeze." Taehyun does, if shakily, and Kai beams. "See? Not so bad, right? Assuming the coldness doesn't weird you out too much."

"It doesn't," Taehyun says quickly. How polite. Kai smiles wider. "But, Kai-ya . . ."

Nope. *Nope.* Still not talking about it. "This is enough, Taehyunie," Kai says softly, cutting that half formed agony off before it can hit the air and ruin the little bit of happiness he's

managed to find in the moment. "I like this. It's *enough.*"

The assurance tastes like silver, even though Kai can't taste anything at all.

"Okay," Taehyun returns, not agreeing so much as accepting. Kai appreciates the gesture regardless, though. "Anyways," he sighs, letting go of Kai's hand to get back to work. "Do you want the good news?"

Surprise tingles through Kai. "There's . . . Good news?" That doesn't seem right. What good could there possibly be about what the Gigye did to his body?

Taehyun huffs on something that's not quite a laugh. "Good in relativity," he clarifies. "From what I can tell, it seems like they more or less left everything about you intact, shape-wise. You still have all the correct organs and bones, they've just been recrafted for new purposes." He taps a finger to Kai's sternum in the middle of pinching the silicone closed again over it, and Kai tries not to wince at how weird of a sensation that is despite the fact that he can't really feel it. "Most of your organs, like your heart, are basically processors now, like little engines that keep you running-"

"I know what a processor is," Kai snorts.

"-and your bones are kind of functioning as the pathways through which all that energy runs," Taehyun goes on without pause for Kai's testy interruption. "Also, your tissue makeup seems to be relatively one-to-one. Anything that was soft is still mostly soft, you have silicone both inside and out. This applies to the organs, too, which makes sense in hindsight. You couldn't move organically if they'd solidified stuff like that into any kind of alloy, you wouldn't be able to even bend over to grab things off the ground."

Kai wrinkles his nose at the ceiling. "How is my heart working as a processor, then?"

"Not too sure, actually," Taehyun confesses. He's moved lower, pushing silicone skin back together over Kai's navel, and it takes everything Kai has not to squirm just from the fact that it's happening, discomforted down to the core of him despite not having any access to the real sensation of it. "I have some suspicions, but I'd like to actually snag a biopsy from you, if that's okay."

A shudder ripples through Kai, involuntary and harsh, entirely instinctive. "Of my- my *heart?*"

"No," Taehyun clarifies in a rush, "no, no. I have no idea what messing with something that central to you would do. But since you're made of a lot of the same material all over, I can probably get a pretty good idea if I take it from somewhere else. Somewhere it won't be missed?" he hedges.

Oh, that doesn't sound good. Kai sits up as Taehyun finishes sealing him. He runs an unsteady hand over the still healing seam, feeling oddly nauseous for someone who can't get sick anymore as he stares at the line that runs from the base of his throat all the way to his groin. *Ugh.* It'll be gone soon, he reminds himself as he takes the medical gown Taehyun hands him and hides the grotesque sight away beneath it. "Where won't a big chunk of my

skin be missed?” he grouses as Taehyun helps him tie the gown in the back. As soon as he says it, though, he knows exactly where.

Great.

“Your ass,” Taehyun deadpans.

Kai swats at him, lightly, carefully, not sure yet how much anything more than a hesitant touch could bruise considering the amount of metal he’s made of now. “Your bedside manner is abysmal,” he scolds.

Taehyun just arches an eyebrow. “Did you want me to use the scientific term?”

“*No*-”

“I want to take a sample of your posterior,” Taehyun intones. Kai smacks him again.

Putting his back to someone, even someone he trusts, has Kai on edge almost immediately, and unfortunately nothing helps in that regard, either. His first thought when Taehyun nudges at him to roll over on the exam table is to tease, quip some smart remark that'll make one or both of them blush. He doesn’t though, his tongue stalled in his mouth when Taehyun’s hands find his hips to help him settle and he feels nothing.

Nothing.

Even that slight give of pressure doesn’t draw up anything more, and Kai bites his lip to keep from choking on the heaviness of that revelation. He'd known, of course, they've been dancing around mentioning it for the last half hour, but that doesn’t lessen the ache of being presented with first-hand proof. Kai lowers his head down onto the forearm he curls across the exam table, fighting against the fresh new wash of grief that threatens to overwhelm him. It's just hands, a gentle press, and it already doesn't even matter. Whether it's something that small or an entire body, all he'll ever feel now is that faint, awful acknowledgement of existence against his silicone skin.

Nothing.

"Oh, *Kai-ya,*" Taehyun murmurs suddenly, and it's only then that Kai realizes he’s shaking. He resists when Taehyun first tries to get him to roll back over, fingers digging harshly into the thin cushion of the exam table until it starts to tear. "Kai-ya," Taehyun soothes, "come on, look at me. You're alright."

Abruptly, Kai decides he's really tired of hearing that. "*No,*" he gasps out, so much weaker than he means to sound, "I'm *not.*"

He's not. And he probably never will be again.

". . . Okay," Taehyun whispers, hitched.

Kai scrambles to roll over, arms reaching out to tug Taehyun down against him, desperate for the contact even though by now he knows full well how little it even registers with his body.

He can’t feel everywhere they tangle together, can’t feel the heat of it, but he does it anyways, shivering around the memory of what it used to be like.

He remembers that Taehyun's embrace was always hesitant at first, light before it would suddenly curl fiercer, shift closer. He remembers what it felt like for them to cling together, how sometimes there would be that desolate edge to it, both of them all too aware of how fleeting time might get if left unchecked. He remembers the warmth, remembers how those first hesitant touches would tickle before they tightened, remembers the dull pain that he’d still found joy in whenever Taehyun would bump their foreheads together to get his attention back where he wanted it.

And the memory of it is all he has.

Even when Taehyun gathers him in his arms so readily, Kai can’t burrow close enough to replicate what it was before, can't find enough weight or pressure in the act to pretend it will ever be the same. He trembles harder, hands clawing at Taehyun’s back in a useless bid to try even though he already knows it won't do him any good.

His fingers are stretched out towards a roaring fire, too ruined by long-born frostbite to make a difference. He's already gone.

"I'm . . . It’s like I'm haunting my own body," Kai hears himself whisper, the syllables hoarse somehow despite everything. "I can catch a trace of what it's supposed to be like, but I . . ."

Nothing.

There's *nothing.*

Another shudder ripples through him, harsher now, and this time Kai recognizes the urge to just let go. It had snuck up on him last time, that instinct to drop all of his emotions and give up taking hold before he'd hand a chance to fight against it. He's not made to handle these kinds of upsets, the mass of synthetic things forming his body struggling around the surge of overwhelmed fear and anguish that, quite simply, doesn't belong there. But those things are the only remaining pieces Kai has left of himself, and with a shake of his head that knocks his chin into Taehyun’s shoulder, he pushes it all back down.

If the memory is all he has, then he'll learn to live with it.

Taehyun has been deathly quiet, not uttering a sound even when Kai had definitely clung to him too harshly. He doesn’t move when Kai’s grip starts to ease, instead leaning in closer, tucking his face onto the crook of Kai’s neck as wayward fingers trace shapes up and down Kai’s back. And if Kai’s silicone and silver is chilled, he doesn’t voice any complaints.

Kai doesn’t know how long they stay like that before Taehyun finally murmurs, "You were lying."

Even if he had the wherewithal to refute that accusation, Kai wouldn't. Taehyun already knows. They both do, really.

"When you said it was enough, you were *lying,*" Taehyun goes on, and Kai closes his eyes as he hears the telltale, wet break in the words. "Kai-ya, I can't . . . I can't help you if you *lie* to me."

"I don't think you can help me, anyways," Kai whispers. "Not with this."

Part of him expects Taehyun to insist that he can certainly try, but that thought doesn't come to fruition. Instead, Taehyun just hugs him tighter, buries his face further against Kai's shoulder. *Acceptance,* he realizes after a beat, the same grim feeling heavy in his chest, too.

After all, what can a doctor do for someone like him?

"I like this," Kai admits softly, honestly. "Even if I can't feel it. I'm just . . . It *has to* be enough, you know? I don't get a choice. Even if I'm only pretending, remembering . . . I'll take that over being completely gone. I wasn't lying, I was just trying to . . . To convince myself, I guess, that I could live with it."

Taehyun sags against him a little, and Kai shifts to accommodate him. He's still so quiet, slow breaths that don't match the pitching staccato of his heart that Kai can sense where they're pressed together. The fingers of his hands clench and unclench against Kai's back, wander over old paths that are no longer well worn, stalling every now and then as if they're fumbling out new maps entirely. He used to do something similar, a lifetime ago now, when they'd get tangled up in each other in a different way, his head thrown back and his eyes squeezed shut as his fingers and palms felt out the familiar planes of Kai's back like he needed to find every mole and malformity there to chart his way home.

He must have had them memorized, Kai thinks, just a single aching moment before Taehyun whispers, "All your scars are gone, you know."

That awful rush of grief hits Kai all over again, the force of a tidal wave threatening to drag him under, and he shudders bodily in Taehyun's hold.

The hands on his back falter, feeling out a place where a ragged burn had once pulled the skin taut and pink for months, only smooth silicone left where it once stood. "I don't care, though," Taehyun murmurs, fierce despite the way his voice cracks and wavers in the air. "*I don't care.* I-I know you're still you, Kai-ya, and I- *I still love you.*"

Kai's arms tighten, too hard, too fast, but Taehyun doesn't protest even though Kai's sure his grip has turned bruising.

"You're still *you,*" Taehyun insists thickly. "And I know it's not enough, and it's not the same, but I-"

"I love you, too," Kai gasps before the moment can be lost, slip away under even more anguish.

Taehyun laughs, low, almost pained. "Yeah? You better. After everything we did to get you back?" He shakes his head into the crook of Kai's neck, a strangled sigh escaping him. "I

know it's not the same," he repeats, "and I'm *sorry* that it's not, but to me . . . To me, the important thing is that you're *here.*"

Kai tenses, startled, a weak, stilted noise escaping him when he realizes that Taehyun's speaking the words directly against his skin. *Fuck,* he's probably kissed him, and Kai couldn't even *tell.* And Taehyun must know that, too, the way he just presses closer when Kai lets out the wounded little sound that betrays him.

It dies in his chest, sputters back to life, and then dances out all over again, hope flickering and fading as he tries to catch hold of it. He knows, deep down, that he needs to give up on it; there's no point in chasing after an old life that's already ashes in the wind. He's here. That's what matters.

And yet . . .

And *yet* . . .

That same, frustrated, stubborn ache wells somewhere inside him as it had a few nights prior, and Kai shivers in the wake of it.

He clings to Taehyun, and wishes desperately that it could be that easy.

An infinite forever looms ahead of him, and at the end of it, Kai is terrified of the silhouette of himself, standing empty and alone.

~~~***~~~

No one talks about how long twenty-four hours really is.

Kai figures it probably doesn't seem that way to most people, the minutes flying by so fast that a single day can disappear in the blink of an eye. It's just not something anyone thinks about, not when time is fleeting, and they spend a third of their life unconscious so as the passage of it can really only be measured in their waking minutes.

There's a joke in all this, somewhere, about how not being able to sleep would logically mean more opportunity to be productive, but Kai has already learned the hard way that that simply isn't true.

Sleep isn't just for the body. It's for the mind, too. And Kai has already wasted away countless hours stuck inside his own captive brain between the four walls of a featureless cell.

He waves Taehyun off at just after midnight anyways, though, assures him that he can get a little rest in his own way and ignoring the annoyance in the other man's gaze when he realizes he's lying. Again.

What else can he do? Make Taehyun stay awake with him? It'll be funny for awhile, before it gets dangerous, before it starts to take its inevitable toll on Taehyun's health.
~~~

White lies, Kai reminds him as gently as he can when Taehyun crowds into his space, grip tight on Kai's forearms as if the touch matters, are what you tell people you love in order to make things a little easier to bear.

He tells himself a lot of those sorts of lies, too.

The lights in the med bay have been dimmed for him, and Kai waits a solid half hour before he begins his inevitable snooping around. Which is impressive for him, really, considering that a year ago he would have just started being a pest while Taehyun was still in the room. Small miracles, he supposes. At least being 99% cyborg has made him uncharacteristically polite and definitely not skittish at all. Nope.

Taehyun's desk is still in an impressive level of disarray, even though Kai definitely saw him trying to tidy it up earlier. It's the man's one true flaw, though this is a stellar disaster even for him. The broken chair Kai had spotted a few evenings before has disappeared though, and the cracked tablets and charts that had taken up a majority of the clutter have been shoved to one side in a haphazard pile. For a moment, he considers sorting through the mess, attempting to fix a few things, but that stupid idea only lasts a second, lingering just long enough for him to unroll one of the crumpled vinyl charts and promptly drop it.

It's a disturbingly detailed drawing of the internal workings of a cyborg, going so far as to show the figure with both the skin peeled back, and the bones cut down to reveal the worst of it. The text on the images labeling the parts is in a language Kai doesn't recognize, the smattering of concentric circles and whorls totally nonsensical to him. To his dismay, though, the lack of written comprehension doesn't lessen the impact of the graphic itself.

In hindsight, it's obvious that Taehyun wouldn't have gone fiddling around inside his body without some sort of guide. And even though Kai knows that, his spine still crawls as he diligently rolls it up and tucks it away within the hoard, out of sight and soon hopefully out of mind.

He goes back to his bed in a series of stiff steps, hefting himself onto it and pulling the blanket up over his lap despite being painfully aware that he doesn't need it. Still, he can't help clinging to those small comforts, picking at a loose thread along the seam at one side as he tries to calm himself down.

It's not as if there's anything unusual about the chart, so much as the fact that Kai had simply not wanted to see it. He purposefully had kept his eyes on the ceiling when Taehyun had cut him open, no amount of morbid curiosity able to draw him to the grim inner workings of his own body. There's something deeply unsettling about knowing now, though, of being too keenly aware of all the bits and pieces that he's made of, outlined into uncanny shapes of real human anatomy.

He wonders, briefly, when and where Taehyun acquired it, and then decides he doesn't want to know.

"Endolphin?" Kai whispers into the air, more of a prayer than a request at this point.

As always, it's a strange sort of relief to see her appear, the arrays of light dancing into being as she forms over his already outstretched hand. "Kai-ya!" she greets, eager as ever.

"Hey," Kai sighs. "Um, do I still have clearance for accessing the ship's non-essential systems?"

She nods her head, swimming around his fingers and then down over his wrist. "Yes! What would you like to access?"

Oh. Well, considering Kai hadn't really expected it to be that easy, he flounders for an answer. "Uh," he sputters, "l-let me just grab a tablet first."

He throws the blanket back off and scrambles from the bed to find one, immediately ruling out all the broken screens piled on Taehyun's desk for multiple reasons. There's one in fairly good shape left by the wayside on one of the other beds, and he takes it back to his own, crossing his legs when he flops back down on the mattress. It's not his device, so he holds it out for Endolphin to activate for him, a grin crossing his face when she doesn't hesitate to do so, the display of the thin glass panel flickering into life. "Is there something specific you'd like to see?" she prompts him again.

Now isn't that a loaded question. There are, quite frankly, at least a hundred things Kai's tempted to look up right now. The ships logs, for one, though he lets that thought die by basically smashing it back down inside himself, already aching just from the thought of what they might say, what his broken crew would have recorded in a year of futile searching and grief. For another moment, he considers asking her to pull up the flight chart, the idea of taking a peek at where The Endolphin has been to in all those absent months hurting significantly less, but a heavy soreness lingers in that idea, too.

"Can you pull up current security footage?" he mumbles tentatively.

The screen in his hands blips open a grid as soon as the words leave his mouth, a couple dozen little rectangles of light and sound, and Kai takes a long, long moment to stare at the familiar array of them before he finally clicks one.

Muscle memory takes hold of him, lack of actual muscles notwithstanding, and Kai freezes as he stares down at the contents of his own bedroom aboard the ship.

It's almost exactly as he left it, the bookshelves even bearing visible dust in places where the tomes upon them haven't been touched or slid from their respective places. His desk is still covered in bits of wire and machinery, his personal tablet set askew between the surface and the wall, propped up on a wadded up shirt he must have left there in a hurry. There are plush toys piled into the corner of the room, held back from turning into a fuzzy avalanche all over the floor by a line of netting he'd pinned in front of them years ago. To the right of his bed, all his pictures are hanging exactly where he remembers them being, tacked down by magnets to The Endolphin's inner hulls, heedless of the scarcity of the paper he'd scanned them onto. Even from the overhead view of the camera, he can spot the details of a few of them, different images captured in literal space and fleeting time; card game antics, late night stargazing out the wide portholes of the bridge, ruined dinners and rushed holidays. He squints at a photo of them in the middle of it all, the haziest one, old enough that he can't

quite make out the two small figures, their hands clasped tight and their backs adorned in twin red capes. Huh. Maybe someone had added a few things after all.

Kai can't focus on that though, not for long, not when his gaze is drawn back to the center of his bed where he's already spotted a shape tangled up in the sheets.

There's a chance, Kai thinks with a sickening lurch somewhere deep inside him, that in cataloguing his memories into the place they've been stored, a few of them have somehow ended up more vivid. He can recall with perfect clarity what Yeonjun's face had looked like the last time they'd seen each other, the overlay of it in his mind's eye briefly marring what he's seeing now. His ears ring for a moment with the ghost of how Yeonjun had howled when he'd been shot, the parting of his lips around the noise painted in stark relief on his eyelids even when Kai closes them. He clamps his palms around his ears, desperate to drown out the echo of it even as he knows full well that it's rattling through him, chasing itself through livewire nerves round and round inside his head, and nothing more.

"Kai-ya?" Endolphin whispers as the tablet drops into his lap, clanking too loudly on his knees, another awful reminder of everything.

As usual, Kai's first compulsion is to suck in a breath, his mouth already open to try before he catches up with that thought and tears it down again. He's shaking, he realizes, the ripples of his abruptly overwhelmed emotions already trembling down his spine and back up again.

"Kai-ya," Endolphin says again, a softer click of the syllables. "Kai-ya, I can call someone-"

"No!" Kai cuts her off, wincing as the rebuttal bounces off the walls of the med bay. "No," he tries again, slightly steadier. "Don't. I have to figure out how to do this by myself."

He can't be a constant burden. He *won't.*

There has to be something he can do, right? Some kind of fucking magic he can tap into to calm down?

He peeks an eye open to stare at where the tablet is sprawled across his legs, his hands clenching up from his ears and over his head.

Yeonjun's hair had been an obnoxious level of faux blond when they'd been running through the swarmed halls of the Gigye base, and now it stands out from the muddled pile of Kai's blankets in deep red tufts. He always did have a penchant for dyeing it, the seasons that don't exist in the far reaches of space often marked by the changing of his style rather than the color of the leaves. Kai wonders, a hollow chill in the very center of him, how many shades he must have missed. On the screen, Yeonjun rolls over in his bed, a bare leg briefly visible before he shivers in his sleep and tugs it back under the covers again, the hand clutching at the sheets bundling them tighter around his shoulders.

At a second glance, Kai can spot the ample proof that not everything in the room is quite as he left it. Some of the clothes piled around the foot of the bed aren't his, pastel shades standing out amidst the greens and blacks of the uniforms mixed in, and the shelf near the headboard is cluttered with blaster parts and cleaning materials. His stuffed animals too seem

to have been messed with, the mountain of them more chaotic than he'd noticed at first glance, clearly rifled through both frequently and recently.

Yeonjun, it seems, has been staying in his room for awhile.

A year, maybe? Kai's mind unhelpfully supplies, and he promptly decides he actually doesn't want to know.

"You've calmed down," Endolphin says quietly, and Kai jolts out of his thoughts to blink at where she's still hovering nearby, watching him.

Has he? He still feels jittery, unsettled, but he can't fully deny the observation. That tingling, overwhelmed flare is no longer rattling around inside him, threatening to drag him towards the tempting oblivion of shutting down. Huh.

Kai lowers his hands from his head, noting the persistent tremble in his fingers that's slowly starting to peter out. "I'm sorry I snapped at you," he murmurs without looking at the hologram.

Even out of the corners of his eyes, he can see Endolphin's befuddlement at the apology. She twists around, head cocking first to one side, then the other. "Why are you sorry?"

"Um . . ." Kai falters. Why indeed, when Endolphin is, for all intents and purposes, just a program. "Because it was mean? It's not okay to be mean to those you like," he explains carefully.

Again, Endolphin loops in the air with a confused little spin. "Like? Kai-ya likes me?"

"Of course I like you," Kai snorts. "I made you."

Apparently, this is not a valid enough reason for the basis of affection for Endolphin, because she just works her way through another twirl and roll. "Hmmm . . ." She muses. "I like you, too!"

Fantastic. "Thank you," Kai says blandly, "I should hope so." It's just a generic response, she doesn't actually have any feelings towards him one way or the other, a bit of banter born on the loyalty he coded her with. Rolling a shoulder, Kai glances back to the glass tablet again, tentatively picking it up in his hands.

Yeonjun hasn't moved since he last gave the footage his attention, and Kai uncrosses his legs to settle into his med bay bed, screen held aloft. This is weird, right? Watching his . . .

His mind trips, stumbles, snagging on the harsh reality as Kai realizes he has no idea what he should call Yeonjun right now. Just because he knows more or less where he stands with Taehyun, doesn't mean that same label still applies to *everyone.*

The word "partner" dies in his mind before it can even finish forming, withering away into a crumpled, anguished little thing.

Kai clears the feed from the screen and sets the tablet aside, hands digging through the thin med bay blanket for Molangie so he can bury his face against it, another tremble starting to shiver through him.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to call someone for you?” Endolphin hedges again.

“Yeah,” Kai whispers, "I'm sure."

If he shakes all night, well, no one but Endolphin is there to see it.

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“Do you want visitors?” Taehyun asks him the next afternoon.

He’s thrown the new diagrams he’s made of Kai’s insides up on the biggest glass screen in the room, writing over the images with an index finger while Kai studiously stares at the opposite wall. The med bay is one of the few places on the ship that has a retractable shield on a portion of the hull, and Kai has Endolphin draw it back for him so he can pretend there’s something to see out in the dark depths of space. There’s not, of course, old Earth science fiction series are pretty full of disinformation. Most of the time, unless you’re coasting through the middle of a fairly planet-populated solar system, there’s nothing but the distant dots of stars as far as the eye can see. Which sounds nice, Kai supposes, if it’s not a part of the daily landscape. He figures it’s about as interesting to him by now as the ocean would have been to sailors. Space is wide, space is vast, and space is actually fairly boring.

Kai dares to cast Taehyun a rather rueful glance over his shoulder, just a quick one, so he doesn’t have to see the horrid outlines of his mechanized organs for more than a second. “Have you been blocking people from getting in here?”

Truthfully, he’s not even remotely shocked by the way Taehyun looks at him at that. It’s the soft, shuttered gaze he always wears when he’s trying to balance his duty as the ship’s medic and his personal feelings. “Kai-ya,” he murmurs, “you *freaked* the last time Soobin-ah was in here.”

Tensing, Kai snaps, “That was *not* because of Soobin-ah. I’d just woken up after- after a *year* of being away. I was flipping out about *everything*.”

Taehyun hums, a thoughtful, but distinctly disbelieving note. “Alright,” he says, entirely placating. Kai scowls. “You do know that I’ve been keeping track of your panic attacks, right?”

Uh, no. “You are?” Kai whispers meekly.

With the same finger he was using to write notes on the diagram, Taehyun points directly down at the node still attached to Kai’s arm. He’d lengthened the wires connecting it to the machine he’s been getting his readings from, the extent of its range now wide enough for Kai to wander freely around the room. Kai blinks at it, flustered as soon as he remembers. Ah, yes. That.
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As always, his folly is a fault of his own making.

“You didn’t call for me last night,” Taehyun says. He’s still sporting that neutral tone, the one that stings with professionalism. Kai tries his damndest not to instinctively wilt beneath it.

He could justify that, Kai thinks, he could. It wouldn’t even be hard, he’d already told Endolphin his reasons, and they haven’t changed. But the explanation dies on the tip of his tongue, and instead Kai just ends up staring stubbornly at his knees, his back to Taehyun again.

If he could actually feel it as anything more than the barest bit of pressure, the hand on his shoulder probably would have made him jump. As it is though, he just freezes, the fingers that had been fiddling with the folds on his medical gown stilling in his lap. “I want you to call me,” Taehyun says, just the tiniest bit hitched, *hurt.* “Or- or *someone.* Haven’t you already suffered alone enough?”

“Holy *shit,* Taehyunie,” Kai chokes, bristling as he turns to face him again. “Don’t say it like that.”

Taehyun arches an eyebrow. “Then how should I say it? Does ‘hey, please don’t go through your trauma responses by yourself, you’re literally making me cry’ work better for you?”

No, it does not. “That’s worse,” Kai grits out.

This time, he does jolt when Taehyun moves, leaning back when the other man braces both hands to the bed and brackets him in. “Kai-ya. I’m trying to *help you,* and you’re breaking my fucking heart.”

That facade is gone, the mask of the impersonal doctor he covers himself up with so often already faded by the time the unsteady cadence of that confession sinks in, and Kai slumps forwards against him, hands fumbling to grip the front of Taehyun’s lab coat and drag him closer. “M’sorry.”

In this position, Taehyun has an unnatural height advantage, his arms easily wrapping around Kai’s hunched shoulders and his chin resting on the top of his head. There’s so much he probably wants to say, Kai thinks as the silence settles heavily between them, a hundred little promises about how it’s alright for Kai to let people worry about him. For some reason, though, Taehyun doesn’t give them voice, merely holding Kai a little tighter as he heaves out a long, quiet breath of a sigh. “Soobin-ah’s been pesting me all day to let him come see you,” he murmurs instead.

Oh.

Kai’s fingers clench where they’ve shifted to Taehyun’s back. “He has?”

Much like it had with Yeonjun, Kai’s mind is rattled with the memory of the last time he’d seen Soobin before everything, chilled over with those fervent kisses and the desperate, lingering tangle of their hands. His palm had felt bruised when he’d first entered the Gigye base, sore from just how much Soobin had clearly not wanted to let go.

His recollections of waking up don't help, either. He hadn't missed how tired Soobin had looked, how his relief had been mixed with such palpable grief. Kai can't even remember the last time he saw his dimples. Had it been a week before Beomgyu had been captured? Or had it perhaps been even longer.

Something painful twists inside him, so sharp it actually makes him flinch, a shiver washing through him despite how Taehyun quickly moves to soothe a hand over his spine. "You don't have to see anyone you don't want to," he says, and Kai starts shaking his head before he even finishes the sentence.

"No, it's fine," Kai mumbles somewhere near the other man's collarbone. "I just . . ."

Out of everyone, Soobin is the one Kai fears he'll disappoint the most. They've known each other the longest, a packaged deal ever since . . .

Kai blinks, his eyebrows furrowing.

"Just what?" Taehyun prompts.

"I don't want him to be upset," Kai returns, brushing that temporary stray moment aside to answer him, tucking it away in the back of his mind for later.

Taehyun has a hand in his hair, or whatever fibers the Gigye replaced it with, carding his fingers through it in slow strokes Kai doesn't feel until they trail over the back of his neck at the end of their journey before starting all over from the beginning. "Why would he be upset?"

Fuck. Why *wouldn't* he be upset? "I'm not the same person," Kai says, the simplest way he can phrase it, and yet it still rips a hole in him to admit aloud.

". . . No one expected you to be, Kai-ya," Taehyun murmurs.

Maybe. But Kai's fairly certain that no one expected him to be *this,* either.

It's a comfort, to cling to Taehyun, at the same time that it claws through him with a fresh new agony with every second he does it. His mind whirrs between contentment and comparison, aching after the memories of Taehyun petting through his hair just like this, a veritable lifetime ago, when the sensation could sink into Kai's very atoms until he'd go boneless under the touch while they were intertwined together. Three days in, and Kai wonders if he'll spend the rest of his unfathomable lifetime missing everything that's been taken from him.

He can't even bring himself to think of Soobin right now in the wake of that miserable recollection, another tremble crashing through him so hard he hiccups on a strangled sound, as if the involuntary motion actually hurts. Which, of course, means he thinks of Soobin anyways, the vicious denial that he shouldn't unheeded by his already spiraling thoughts.

fingers tangled together

palms pressed low on a spine

or splayed over the center of Soobin's stomach

foreheads leaning against each other

a chin in the crook of a neck

the fit of Soobin's back to Kai's chest

an arm thrown over a middle

noses teasingly brushing back and forth

exhales ghosted across bare skin

"Kai-ya."

"Kai-ya!"

The world snaps back into focus as Kai finally registers Taehyun's hands on his face. He blinks as his head is jerked up, lips parting around a breath he can't take. "Sorry," he croaks, if only for lack of anything else to say.

Taehyun's eyes are wild, wide as they flicker over every bit of Kai's face. "Kai-ya," he whispers hoarsely. "Where did you go?"

Where did he go? Kai lets the question settle in the air, confusion coursing through him until Taehyun adds, low and undeniably scared, "I've been calling your name for almost five minutes."

". . . Five minutes?" Kai chokes. That much? It hadn't felt like more than a few seconds. How had he let that much time pass without even noticing? "Did . . . Did I shut down?"

He's only somewhat relieved when Taehyun shakes his head. "You were awake," the other man says, every note of it strained. "But I couldn't make you hear me. If you hadn't been trembling so hard, I would have thought you had. Kai-ya . . ." He swallows, and Kai instantly knows he won't like what he's about to be told. "I don't . . . I don't think seeing anyone else right now is a good idea."

The most human emotion, Kai decides, is stubbornness. It rears its head in him almost intrinsically, reactionary to being told what he shouldn't do, the ugly flare of it entirely untamped when Kai says much too sharply, "I want to see Soobin-ah."

Taehyun's fixed his professional expression back into place, his lips pursed thin when he replies, "I'm telling you, as your doctor, that this is against your best interests."

Kai forces on a smile he doesn't feel, even proverbially, "And since when have I ever listened to doctor's orders?"

At the very least, he does enjoy Taehyun's long-suffering sigh. "Literally never. That one time you broke your arm . . ."

“And you caught me the next day crawling around in the engine room,” Kai fills in for him. “Yeah, exactly. Why should this be any different?”

Again, Taehyun heaves out a sigh. He lifts a hand back into Kai’s hair, carding caramel bangs out of his eyes as he says, “Alright. On one condition: you *have* to tell me next time you have a panic attack, okay?”

Ugh. “You drive a hard bargain,” Kai grumbles, burying his face in the collar of Taehyun’s lab coat again.

“I do indeed,” Taehyun deadpans.

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Soobin stops by a little after eight in the evening by The Endolphin’s clock. Kai knows he’s on his way well before he shows up, wary of how Taehyun has gotten fidgety where he’s taken up root at his desk, the stack of cracked tablets set into even further disarray. He doesn’t mind that the other man clearly plans to stay during the visit, they never had those kinds of boundaries before, but it feels so wholly different this time that it sets Kai’s nerves on edge. Taehyun isn’t lingering because he’s comfortable, or for the company, he’s obviously planning on keeping an eye on them. Or to be more precise, on Kai specifically.

When Soobin does appear, Kai stays where he is, his legs crossed on his med bay bed, a blanket over his lap and Molangie sitting tucked against one side, his fingers curled so tightly into the soft gives of the plush’s body that he fears he might rip it unintentionally.

In the light of not being mid meltdown, Kai has a chance to actually take in the captain’s features when he approaches. His earlier observation that Soobin had looked tired wasn’t just a trick of the moment, he looks *exhausted.* There’s a new sallowness to his face that Kai hates immediately, like he hasn’t been eating right, or maybe even at all, and despite the fact that he’s walking with an air of eagerness, his steps drag.

Twelve months, Kai reminds himself grimly, is a long time.

“Kai-ya,” Soobin says when he’s finally close enough that he’s sure Kai can hear, and Kai reaches for him without even thinking. His vision flickers, just for a second, like his systems suddenly can’t cope with the vicious surge of emotion that has a tremble shuddering through him, but Kai ignores it as Soobin hurries to set down what he’s carrying and swoop forwards into his waiting arms.

He’s struck with that instant and awful chill of how wrong the embrace feels, like a slim shawl being draped around him when Soobin is clearly putting so much of his weight into the hug. Kai clings to the apparition of the feeling anyways though, grasping at the back of Soobin’s black and blue uniform with everything in him as he burrows into the crook of the other man’s neck.

After a minute, he’s not sure which of them is shaking more, or if it’s just one long aftershock, the fading waves of a quake that have been ruining them for an entire year.
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“Kai-ya,” Soobin says again, fiercer, wetter. “*Kai-ya.*”

Kai chokes on a sob he can only voice. “Told you I’d be back,” he manages, and he’s so, so gratified when Soobin hitches out a bitter, but still real laugh.

He straightens up in increments, barely enough distance between them for him to look Kai in the eye while still holding him bruisingly tight. “Took you long enough,” he sniffles, and *oh,* from this close Kai can see how red his eyes are, the dry skin around the lids that has clearly been there for so long that it’s raw, flecks of it peeling from being rubbed on too often.

Soobin leans his forehead against his, Kai’s face cradled between his hands, and Kai wants so desperately to kiss him that it *hurts.* He doesn’t.

He doesn’t.

“I looked for you,” Soobin murmurs. “Every day. I never stopped.”

Stupid. Kai smiles anyways. “Well, you found me,” he whispers.

He doesn’t say all the things Soobin already knows, because there’s no point. They're both aware he’d found Kai too late, that the search itself couldn’t have gone any better. He was lucky, really, that he found Kai at all.

It could have been so much worse, Kai reminds himself in those cobwebbed, dark corners of his mind. *It could have been so much worse.*

And yeah, maybe what he’s been left with will never be enough, but it’s a privilege Kai is going to treasure all the same.

Soobin squeezes his cheeks, the already fond smile on his face softening further, and Kai tries not to focus on the grief in it when he turns and points to the stuff he’d set aside on the other bed a moment ago. “Look, I brought you some antiques.”

Kai doesn’t move from his persistent hold as he leans around him to take a peek. At first glance, he thinks it’s just a stack of paper, but then his eyes catch the splashes of color, and his interest piques. “Oh?”

“‘Oh,’ he says,” Soobin huffs, a statement apparently directed to Taehyun on the other side of the room from the way he gets an answering snort from the other man. He untangles one arm from under Kai’s to reach for the pile. “Here.”

It’s . . . A guy? The flimsy book is decorated with an image of a man in a tight blue suit and red cape soaring through the sky, and Kai blinks at it for a few seconds before Soobin starts to gently nudge him further up the mattress, plucking at the hem of Kai’s blanket. “Scoot up,” he demands, and yep, there’s the Soobin Kai remembers, “These beds are too small to sit side by side.”

Liar. Kai does so anyways though, eager for the close contact if only for what it means.

He shuffles back until Soobin seems satisfied, unfolding his legs as the ship's captain clambers onto the bed in front of him and fits himself snuggly in the space Kai's left, slumped down with his back to Kai's chest, Kai's knees now veritable elbow rests as he flips the book open to the first page. It's so . . . Casual. Like they've been doing this all their lives. Like Kai was never gone, Soobin slots them together as he leans his shoulders into Kai's ribs as if they were made to fit that way.

Tentatively, Kai starts to curl an arm around the other man's middle, tense as he waits for rejection that never comes. If anything, Soobin just sinks further against him, a low note of contentment hanging in the air. Kai tightens his arm. "You'll have to tell me if I'm hurting you," he whispers, a quiet warning and an even quieter reminder of how much has changed.

"You won't," Soobin hums, even if they both know it's not that simple. "Do you want me to read it aloud?"

Kai glances at the open pages in front of them, again met by the sight of the figure in the blazing cape. This time, though, the depiction is fragmented, paneled into pieces and decorated with word bubbles. Oh, he recognizes faintly, it's a comic book. Huh. "Sure," he says. "Are you going to do silly voices, too?"

Soobin scoffs, the tone suggesting that Kai is making an absolutely absurd request, and Kai grins as he settles his chin on the other man's shoulder. "No. God. You ask that every time."

Does he?

Kai shrugs. "I can do funny voices then, if you're going to be a stick in the mud."

"Don't you dare," Soobin grumbles.

Antiques, Soobin had called the books, and he's not wrong.

It's not like there aren't books in space, but they're rare, expensive, artifacts from Earth specifically even moreso. Kai drinks it all in like he'll never have another chance, feeling half starved as his eyes rove over painted depictions of city streets and skyscrapers, oceans and sprawling woods, the cacophony of people with their heads craned back to watch the caped crusader soar through blue skies he'll never see. He barely registers half of the stories' plots, too focused on everything else as Soobin works his way through one, then three, then five issues seemingly at random. The collection he's amassed is small it seems, disjointed, not all of the threads finished when they extend across multiple installments. Like a lot of old media, Kai assumes that most of it is digitally archived somewhere, on one of the arcs or on Meon Jigu, accessible enough, but nowhere near the same.

It would be nice, Kai thinks distantly as he listens to the rise and fall of Soobin's voice as he reads, his mind lulled carefully blank, if people like the man in the comic's pages had actually existed. Though then again, against the Gigye, Kai's not even sure a superhero could have saved the day.

He stares at the renditions of things he's never seen, a hollow space in the very depths of him.

Houses. Homes. Schools. *Playgrounds.* Trees. Fields. Seas. Mountain peaks. Urban sprawls. Museums. Beaches. Movie Theaters. Concert stands. Animals. People.

On the page, the figure in the red cape floats above it all, his hand reached out to a woman sobbing on a building's edge. Soobin's voice has gone soft at the edges while he reads, and Kai nuzzles into the crook of his neck to the tune of the words.

"If you honestly believe in your heart of hearts, that you will never, ever have another happy day . . . Then step out into the air. I'll keep my promise. I won't stop you. But if you think there's a chance -- no matter how small -- that there might be just one more happy day out there -- then take my hand."

"I like this," Kai murmurs, his nose pressed to Soobin's pulsepoint just so he can detect the thrum of it.

Soobin makes a low, indecipherable noise in the back of his throat. "Yeah. I know."

He lifts a hand, his fingers apart, and Kai watches him do it through half-lidded eyes before he reaches out to take it.

"It's my favorite issue, too," he says, and Kai refrains from telling him that that's not what he meant, relishing instead on everything else he's been granted.

By the time Soobin finally leaves for the night, departing with a reluctant wave and mostly only by Taehyun's scolding that he needs to rest, Kai almost imagines that his silicone skin feels warm in the wake of him.

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"This is the worst idea," Taehyun says, and for once Kai agrees with him.

He doesn't voice that, though, of course, his own eagerness for a sense of normalcy in the face of everything else outweighing his admittedly dismal sense of self preservation. It's fine. It'll all be just fine.

Soobin folds his arms over his chest, one eyebrow climbing in an expression Kai recognizes as the one he tends to wear when he thinks his position as the ship's captain is being questioned. Taehyun meets it with a similar look, unflinching in his resolve that this is, hands down, the dumbest fucking idea Soobin has ever had. Which is saying a lot. Despite his place on The Endolphin, Soobin has a lot of truly stupid ideas. It's sort of what makes him a great leader, most of the time, his innate ability to suggest something profoundly idiotic and then slowly mold it into something good through discourse with the rest of them a quality most other people of his rank don't possess at all.

"I don't see how," Soobin argues. "He's done well this week, and you just said two minutes ago that he hasn't had a panic attack in days. Why not let him back onto the bridge?"

Taehyun pinches the bridge of his nose. "Kai-ya being a little more emotionally stable isn't a reason for him to be *working* again," he sighs. "We should ease him into it. For fuck's sake,
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he's still sleeping in the med bay-"

"Spending the night," Kai corrects. Taehyun shoots him a withering look. "I don't sleep."

Well, at least they've hit the point where they can amicably bicker about the grim realisticness of certain terminologies, Kai thinks as Taehyun turns back to Soobin.

"He can sleep in his room if he wants to," Soobin states, also clearly ignoring Kai's insistent modification. "I don't understand why he hasn't been in the first place."

A finger jabs into the node still attached to Kai's left forearm, hard enough that Kai would have probably yelped if he could actually feel more than the vaugest sense of pressure from the act. "I'm *monitoring* him," Taehyun growls.

"He doesn't need monitoring."

"Yes," Taehyun snaps, "he does. He's been awake for barely a week, hyung. We don't know enough about his current biology or mental state to be so blasé about this. What if something happens?"

"Like what?" Soobin counters immediately. "What do you possibly think will happen that we can't handle? He's not a fucking alien, Taehyun-ah," he says between his teeth. "He's *Kai.*"

Alright. Enough. Kai holds up both hands in a universal sign of surrender before he pushes into the middle of them and eases the two apart. As with most arguments between the five of them, any sense of personal space was foregone awhile ago, Soobin and Taehyun almost nose to nose by the time Kai intervenes. "Okay, I know I'm a funky cyborg and all now," Kai starts, pretending he doesn't see the way Soobin tenses up at the phrase, "but let's not talk about me in the third person like I'm not standing right here. Please?"

"Sorry," Taehyun murmurs at the same time Soobin utters a stiff, "You're not a cyborg."

Kai glances at him, a slow, reluctant turn of his head until he can take in the haunted shadow in Soobin's gaze. "Soobin-ah . . ."

"You're *not,*" Soobin says, doubling down with fresh vehemence. "We got to you in time, your skin isn't silver, your hair is still brown. You're . . . You're *Kai,*" he repeats.

It's not a denial, per say, Kai knows, but it's not far from one. He doesn't say Kai is human, either.

Taehyun heaves out a long exhale through his nose, mirroring Soobin as he crosses his arms over himself, his posture stiff. "What do you want to do, Kai-ya?"

Well, at least they're asking him now, rather than just yelling around him.

"I don't think getting back into the swing of things will kill me," Kai states, overlooking the way they both flinch. "And I'm bored. Besides, it's not like I can access much right now, right?"

Reluctantly, Soobin nods. “We . . . Removed your admin privileges from Endolphin awhile ago . . .”

“Good,” Kai intones. He’d honestly be pretty pissed if they hadn’t.

A frown marrs Taehyun’s face, “How do you expect to do your job without full control of Endolphin?”

Rude. “I can do plenty,” Kai says. “I don’t need all of Endolphin’s capabilities to track signals or interpret radio waves. And it’s not like I'm incapable of dictating basic ship maintenance to someone else if necessary.”

Of course none of this is ideal, what Kai’s listed off only a fraction of his former duties, but it’s better than nothing. He’d rather at least pretend he’s useful than continue to sit around in the med bay all day, literally staring at the wall while Taehyun pours over the diagrams of his internal mechanisms. His mind doesn’t dwell on the fact that, after a full year, the other four have probably already figured out how to work around all the spaces he left behind.

Taehyun grimaces at him, more protests clearly still ready on the tip of his tongue, but he doesn’t speak them, his lips pursing together instead before he sighs, “Fine.” It’s pretty much exactly the reaction Kai thought he’d receive, begrudging acceptance Taehyun’s forte when it comes to these things. “But if it ends up being too much, you let someone know,” he urges.

Kai doesn’t miss the fact that he chooses not to specify that it has to be him. Which is why he easily returns a completely honest, “I will.”

He likes the way Taehyun’s strict demeanor softens, even if it’s only for a moment.

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Kai remembers his first day aboard The Endolphin, back when she’d been just another little Gigye scouting ship. The recollection of that is starkly clear in his mind, almost fresh despite the fact that it’s been seven years since. She’d belonged to him from the second he’d stepped foot in her, his hands running along the cool metal interior like greeting an old friend he’d spent a lifetime searching for without ever having met.

They’d called her a waste of time.

Not his crewmates, of course, they hadn’t even known each other then, but the officials on the arc had scoffed at Kai’s tenacity in advocating that he be allowed to keep her, fix her up. “*It’s too dangerous,*” they’d said, wary of letting a weedy little trainee like him, chubby-cheeked and only sixteen, spend all his hours trying to salvage one of the things that had helped destroy so much.

Huening Kai is nothing if not viciously persistent, though, and in the end they’d given in.

It’s almost funny now to think of what a mess she’d been.

There are still some scorch marks on the walls between the med bay and the bridge, old scars from before Kai knew her that can’t be erased. The entire flight deck had to be retooled,
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systems crafted anew or tinkered with until they were suitable for a human crew, and that wasn't the only thing. Kai had overhauled half the other rooms too, dragged in beds and tables, shelves and desks, finding space for a kitchen and a pantry, a med bay and a laundry room, all things the lifeless Gigye didn't need. The Endolphin isn't just his ship, it's his *home,* built by his own hands until they were blistered and raw, and he will never not be proud of her.

Not even when those same halls and rooms feel foreign, the absence of his own presence having left the very air inside the ship heavy and stale as he makes his way to the bow. There are access panels along the way that Kai can see haven't been touched in ages, covered in a fine layer of dust without a single fingerprint left to smudge it away. It makes sense, of course, there's no need for the others to check on every little thing they way he used to do. Hell, most of the stuff he habitually tested from those panels someone could technically do from anywhere in the ship. But the routine had been soothing, his well tread path around The Endolphin late at night as she'd hummed through space something that kept him from going stir crazy when left alone too long with his thoughts.

Regretfully, Kai mourns not getting the sleep while he'd still be able to, cursing his past self for thinking it a waste of time. You truly don't know what you've got til it's gone, huh.

"You keep picking at your uniform," Soobin notes as they make their way to the bridge one step at a time. "Is it too tight?"

Kai blinks, turning to stare down at where he is, indeed, repeatedly fidgeting with the fabric of the front of his top. "If it is," he says without thinking, "it's not like I can feel it." Beside him, Soobin stills, his footfalls faltering until he stops entirely. Kai turns back to him, towards the half meter that's suddenly cracked open between them, and clenches his fingers in the green creases he's made over his sternum. "Sorry," he whispers.

Maybe, he consoles himself, there'll be a time when offhanded statements like that won't sting so much, won't leave all of them sore, but that's a long way off. And it's not today. Today, Soobin just looks pale, agonized, and there's nothing Kai can offer him to make it any better.

There's every chance this wound will linger so long it will simply become a part of them, the ache turning familiar and old, incapable of ever fading entirely.

Neither of them says anything, and after a moment Soobin starts walking again, coming up on Kai's left to refit his palm against the small of Kai's back. It doesn't matter, it seems, that Kai can't feel anything more than the fragile outline of his hand.

The rest of their journey continues in silence, the only sound the ring of boots on metal tiles, and were it not for Soobin's steady touch, Kai would probably find the impersonal atmosphere stifling.

He digs his heels in just short of the closed doors to the bridge.

"Kai-ya?"

They haven't talked about it, Kai realizes belatedly, haven't discussed it at all. He has no idea the kind of situation he's about to walk into. Fuck, do Yeonjun and Beomgyu even *want* to see him?

Soobin's hand on his back presses closer, and as though reading his mind, he murmurs, "They've been asking about you."

Kai turns to blink at him, mouth popping open around a retort he can't form. Once, he would have taken such a statement at face value. Despite everything, the communication between the five of them had been impeccable, the feelings intrinsic more often than not. But now there's an entire year between Kai and the people he left behind, and Soobin's soothing tone only serves to leave him awash with doubt.

"Let's all just do our best, okay?" Soobin says softly.

Such an easy thing to say, but it really is all they can hope for.

"Yeah," Kai returns. Soobin's fingers curl against his spine when his voice wavers.

The doors to the bridge slide open.

For all intents and purposes, the flight deck is almost exactly as it was when Kai was last there. The captain's chair sits at the dead center, perfectly flanked by two seats on either side, five stations looking out over the universe beyond the wide view window at the front of the ship. Three of them have already been filled, Taehyun sprawled haphazardly in his with one leg thrown over the arm as he balances two different tablets in his lap, one of which sporting that fucking diagram again, which means Kai barely spares him a glance. In contrast, Yeonjun looks half asleep, his chin propped up in a palm as he watches the radar screen on his console and his free hand restlessly fidgeting with the grip of the blaster holstered on his hip. It's a habit, Kai thinks at the same time he realizes it's not one he recognizes, something formed in the months he's missed. And then, of course, there's Beomgyu.

Beomgyu, who hadn't been there the last time Kai was on the flight deck.

Beomgyu, whose chair had sat empty until Yeonjun had filled it, desperate grief making the other man try and cover up the void that had been left behind.

Beomgyu, who's sitting just a little too stiffly now, his old tendency to tuck his feet under him even while piloting a huge spacecraft abandoned due to necessity, one shiny chrome leg jutting out uncomfortably beneath his station console.

It's a good model, Kai registers even as the weight of the sight claws through him, finding purchase in the crevices of his mind that are already painfully bruised. He'd known, back when they'd found him, that this was the likely outcome. Somehow, that doesn't make it hurt any less, the agonized ache of seeing it heavy even amidst all the other awful things Kai has to live with.

Soobin clears his throat, and Kai stiffens as all attention snaps in his direction.

In hindsight, it might have been a better idea to do this one on one, because Kai doesn't know where to look first, which startled expression he's met with strikes him harder. Or, at least, he doesn't initially.

They both freeze, two sets of wide eyes fixed on Kai, but it's Yeonjun who moves first. He stumbles to his feet on shaking legs, lips parting around a ragged, ragged exhale that leaves him deathly pale in its wake. His gaze rakes over Kai so slowly, excruciating centimeter after centimeter, before it finally settles on his face, his eyebrows furrowing as it flicks over his features once, twice, three times, before his mouth snaps shut again, and then he's surging forwards.

Kai lets out a startled *"oof"* as though there's any air to knock out of him when Yeonjun bundles him into his arms, his own hands scrambling to return the embrace with equal ferocity. Like with Soobin and Taehyun before him, Yeonjun's grip on him is so forceful that, were Kai still human, it would probably hurt. Which means that in this body, it's just enough for him to feel it. But that's the best Kai can do, the limit of his capabilities, because it only hits him that Yeonjun is crying when he chokes out an awful, wretched sob the likes of which Kai has never been unfortunate enough to hear before.

Neither of them says anything, Kai struggling to stay sturdy on his feet as Yeonjun sways against him. He's thinner, he registers as he trembles in turn, the set of his shoulders tight, the line of his waist too small. And he's not the only one, either. Kai had noticed the same thing about Soobin, and Taehyun, to a lesser degree.

His eyes find Beomgyu, meeting the other man's where he's leaned over the armrest of his chair, picking out similarly haunted details he only has a moment to observe before Beomgyu jerks his gaze away.

Oh.

Oh.

It was always, Kai knows, going to be one of them. Between five people there was never a chance it wouldn't happen. Human emotion is volatile, afterall, ever changing, shaped by situations and surroundings, and Kai has been absent from a year of those, only to come back unwhole. Beomgyu bites his lip, his eyebrows furrowing, and stares out at the ocean of space. Kai lets the rejection sink into the very pits of his soul, a strangled gasp of grief rending through him until it threatens to tear apart every synthetically crafted atom he's made of.

Somehow, Yeonjun holds him together. His grip on Kai hasn't loosened in the slightest, if anything it's only grown tighter, as if he fears that letting go will make Kai disappear entirely. And it might, really. A black hole could open up right here on the bridge, and Kai would probably let it take him, stretch him out until he can no longer remember the shape of himself as he slips away into the unknown beyond.

How odd, he thinks through the mire of anguish threatening to drown him, to be so untethered by something like this. How selfish, to be so easily ruined by one abruptly missing piece.

But that's what it is, isn't it; a fractured off part of himself, the rest of him left adrift without that crucial bit. Beomgyu can't look him in the eye, and Kai feels as though someone has pulled every star from the galaxy, the void in the wake of it so empty he can't climb his way back out.

Another shiver ripples through him, harsh, jagged. Kai flattens a hand over Yeonjun's back, desperate anew for something to ground him as he searches for that faint thrum of a heartbeat he can barely register. He finds it almost immediately, palm pressing along the rhythm as he closes his eyes and buries his face against the crook of Yeonjun's neck. Not this time, he swears over the rush of overwrought emotion that crashes through him. *Not this time.* If he loses track of himself now on the bridge, Taehyun will never let him leave the med bay again.

He hears Yeonjun's breath hitch near his ear, the cadence hoarser than it was before. "Baby, you're *shaking,*" he whispers.

"M'okay," Kai promises thickly, but the affirmation rings sour and hollow in the air, such an obvious lie. Yeonjun's arms squeeze around him. "I'll be okay," Kai tries again, surer now even if it's still so untrue.

Kai dares to lift his head from Yeonjun's shoulder, vision flickering when he catches Beomgyu watching, only for the pilot to quickly avert his gaze again.

Fuck.

Fuck.

He's going to shut down unless he gets ahold of himself.

"You got a hand on my heart?" Yeonjun murmurs into the hinge of his jaw, and Kai manages a jerky, stiff nod. "Alright. You wanna count beats with me, Hyuka? Come on now. One . . ."

"T-two," Kai chokes, hiding his face against Yeonjun's throat again.

"Good boy. Three."

"Fo-four."

"Five."

"Six."

"Seven. You're doing so well," Yeonjun encourages, heedless of how he's trembling, too, really only held up by Kai's unrelenting hold on him. "Keep going."

"Eight."

Kai loses track of the numbers, doesn't notice that at some point, they've stopped matching up with the unsteady beat of Yeonjun's heart, replying almost purely on autopilot. He tucks his chin into Yeonjun's shoulder and blinks through the haze that threatens to overtake him, the softly murmured counting trailing in the wake of his muddied thoughts, brushing them

aside as the seconds tick by into minutes. Well after he's long tuned even that out, Kai is able to ease his eyes open.

The bridge is quiet save for the steady hum of The Endolphin's engines. Kai registers one of Yeonjun's hands in his hair, another sweeping up and down over his back, anchoring him home as he glances Beomgyu's direction across the room.

It doesn't hurt any less when Beomgyu quickly looks away, but Kai bears it. And maybe that's the solution to it all, in the end; he simply has to find a way to endure everything. Even this.

"Still with me?" Yeonjun asks, and Kai straightens up to lean their foreheads together, as he returns a hoarse, "Yeah."

Yeonjun doesn't let him go far, cupping firm hands around Kai's cheeks as he dons a smile Kai can see quivers at the seams. "Never thought I'd see this pretty face again," he murmurs, the corners of his eyes still distinctly moist. He glides his touch down the side of Kai's throat, to his shoulder, his collarbone, and then further still until he can splay his fingers out over the very center of him. "Don't you *ever* do that to me again, Hueningie."

He's settled his palm over where the scar would be, Kai realizes, if his body could still leave scars. It hadn't even had a chance to form before the Gigye went to work on him, his life only saved by the unnatural healing of synthetic tissue and bone. Yeonjun had watched him bleed out, and now there's not even a mark to prove that, the other man's fingers clenching in the green and black fabric of Kai's uniform across nothing but an awful memory.

"I thought for sure it would kill me," Yeonjun whispers, the confession so low that Kai knows it's only for his ears. "Leaving you there, I really thought I would die." It's such a terrible thing to say, but that doesn't make it any less true.

Yeonjun has always loved fiercely, and he certainly wouldn't be the first person to depart the mortal coil on account of a broken heart. Still, the admission makes Kai ache in all the worst ways, the thought that he might have returned to one more empty seat too easily seeping into his very soul. "I'm not going anywhere," he swears, meaning every syllable even though he's said such vows before.

Even if he spends the rest of his long, long life grasping for everything he's lost, Kai isn't such a fool as to disregard everything he's gained.

It will never be enough.

But in the end, that doesn't matter.

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Beomgyu doesn't look his way again for Kai's entire stint on the bridge.

It would almost be impressive, considering their stations are right fucking next to each other, if it didn't hurt so bad.
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Kai sorts through rogue radio waves and distant foreign signals on the screen of his console for a solid six hours, neither acknowledging it or thinking of it as he goes through the monotony of listening, recording, and cataloging with the same single-mindedness that's already carried him through so much.

Beomgyu doesn't say anything, either, deathly quiet as he steers The Endolphin through the depths of space, his prosthetic leg tapping against the hull beneath their feet the only sound he makes.

Soobin tries to comment on it, once, leaving his seat at the center to pace Beomgyu's way and murmur something to him that Kai can't hear, his fingers soothing through Beomgyu's hair just over his ear for a few long minutes as they talk in hushed tones, only a few inches apart. Whatever they discuss though doesn't become public knowledge, and Kai tries not to let it get to him when Soobin finishes the conversation with a soft, "*Alright,*" before turning to give Kai's shoulder a squeeze as he passes.

He's not bitter. He's not mad. He doesn't want anyone to have to pick sides, god forbid, but the whole thing feels so inherently wrong that he can't help but bristle anyways, sinking lower in his chair as he swipes his fingers over the screen of his console.

And if he's upset, that's no one's problem but his.

Unfortunately, that's exactly what he is, to put it mildly. He's upset, the ache in his chest visceral despite the fact that there's nothing there to pulse that feeling through him, and the longer he sits there, zoning out as he fumbles through the tedium of the duties he usually doesn't even have to think about, the more the agony of it all tears at him.

By the time he remembers his promise to Taehyun, he's trembling. He stares at his hands for a long minute, and then at Beomgyu, still studiously keeping his gaze averted, and in an instant it's too much all over again.

"I think I'm gonna turn in," Kai mumbles even though that's not a thing he can physically do anymore.

Everyone (except Beomgyu) glances up from their stations. "Already?" Yeonjun croaks from across the room.

Kai nods, unable to muster an apology he knows won't ring true. He doesn't want to be here anymore, not on the flight deck, at least. Not where he so very clearly isn't wanted.

They'll have to sort it out somehow, eventually, but Kai doesn't think that moment should be now. And the longer he stays, the more likely it feels like it might be.

There's a phantom pain at the very heart of him, uncaring of the fact that he's only metal and silicone now, heavy with the weight of a piece of himself he no longer has.

"Do you want to go back to the med bay?" Taehyun asks, and Kai shakes his head before he even finishes the sentence.

God, no. Anywhere but there. If Kai spends one more lonely night in the med bay, he's going to lose what little mind he has left.

A hand fits along the back of his neck, and the shiver that had been trying to work its way through Kai peters out as he cranes his gaze up to see Soobin leaning over him. "Why don't you go to my room," he says. "It's getting late anyways. You can get some rest while we . . ." He pauses, and Kai sees the brief, choked realization stutter through him before Soobin finishes a stilted, " . . . While we . . . Eat . . ."

"Okay," Kai agrees, not giving either of them a chance to dwell on just how much Kai will be missing out on from now on, how many seemingly innocuous things are no longer his to share. Eating is just one of so, so many, and Kai can't even bring himself to grieve it much when there are worse things by far that he's lost.

He makes sure to squeeze Yeonjun's hand before he goes, Taehyun's too, a quiet promise that he really is as alright as he can be lest he worry them any more than he already has.

The doors to the bridge have barely closed behind him before Kai swishes a hand through the air to call Endolphin into being. In full uniform he doesn't have to speak to do it, permissions or not, the hub of machinery wrapped around his right forearm not requiring that verbal cue. She's as much a part of him while he's on duty as she is the ship itself. Even without his full access to her capabilities, she appears instantly, tiny light particles grouping together until Kai's faced with the bright, ever happy shape of her over the palm of his hand.

"Kai-ya!" she chirps, and Kai grins despite himself. "I haven't seen you all day!"

"I've been busy," Kai apologizes. "But we can hang out now, if you'd like. I was thinking of taking a little stroll around the ship."

She whistles gleefully, flipping over backwards through the air. "Yes! I'd like that very much!"

It almost feels surreal, retreading his old paths like this, Kai thinks as he makes his way through the halls, the act of slotting himself back into the routine of checking diagnostics on every panel he passes as familiar and instinctive for him as breathing used to be. Endolphin keeps pace with him, hovering over his shoulder as he pulls up the details of different parts of the ship, scans them, and moves on. For the most part everything seems to be as it should, and he only makes a note of a few little hiccups in the systems that he might need to have looked into later on the small console strapped to his arm. Like The Endolphin, the almost plush material he's made a part of his uniform is old Gigye tech, a piece he's thankful he'd thought to leave behind when they'd breached the base a year prior. It responds to the lightest touch, and it doesn't need a screen the way the mix of human and alien machinery they usually use does. Instead, it reflects holograms into the air that Kai taps at and swipes away at his whim, the images and readings responding to the sensation of touch without actually needing the contact.

He's tried to replicate it for use throughout the ship, but he's only been able to rework what's already there, and The Endolphin is outdated by the constantly evolving Gigye standards, built primarily off of what they'd stolen from Earth before they'd destroyed it. They've

moved on to bigger and brighter things by now, and the closest Kai has come to replicating the idea is the program with which Endolphin was made.

And, well, there's too much of himself in her for him to be comfortable doing something similar to the entire ship, let alone allowing it be used by anyone other than the five people aboard.

Out of propriety, Kai doesn't access the panels outside the others' personal quarters. That, at least, he's well aware is not his place anymore.

However, his steps stall outside the sixth room before he can help himself.

Unlike the other five, this panel clearly hasn't seen any use in *awhile.* There's dust coating the screen, not even the outlines of fingerprints smudged upon it, and Kai's nonexistent heart climbs into his throat as it sinks in what that must mean.

"How long . . ."

Endolphin cocks her head back and forth as she processes his unfinished question. "No one's used the big bedroom for a long time," she clicks, the vague nonchalance of the statement leaving Kai even colder than he already is by nature now.

He's tempted to peek, hand hesitating just centimeters from the panel as that urge floods his mind. Are the sheets the same ones he'd put on a week before Beomgyu was captured? Will they be dusty too? Surely "a long time" in this case just means a few weeks, right, a month at best. She can't possibly be suggesting that the four of them haven't slept all in the same bed the entire time Kai's been gone.

His hand drops back to his side, fingers balling towards his palm as he decides that he doesn't want to know.

"We were falling apart," Taehyun had said, and for some reason, Kai hadn't quite thought about everything that might mean.

"You're still up?"

Kai jolts, a squawk of alarm escaping him as he whirls around to find Soobin standing only a little ways away. His hair is a little more mussed than it had been earlier, and there's a dot of sauce staining the stomach of his uniform, signs that more time has passed than Kai realized. "Um . . ."

"It's alright," Soobin says. "I don't mind you wandering around the ship, Kai-ya. This is your home. I'm just surprised."

For some reason, Kai doesn't know what to say to that. Despite Soobin's reassurance, he still feels like he's been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, and he follows the way Soobin turns to glance at the room they're standing in front of. "Ah," he says, his tone suddenly stiff, "That's . . . It's a mess in there," he explains, clearing his throat. "Was my room too cramped for you?"

“No. I actually haven’t even been there yet.” It’s not a complete lie, really. He’d passed it on his lap around the ship, but he hadn’t bothered to enter.

Soobin waves a dismissive hand between them. “Doesn’t matter, I was heading this way to ask you if you wanted to spend the night on the bridge anyways.” His eyes light up, and Kai’s breath would hitch at the familiarity of it all had he the capability.

“You mean . . . Like we used to?” he hedges, not quite daring to get his hopes up fully.

“*Exactly* like we used to,” Soobin beams.

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They’ve been doing this for as long as Kai can remember.

The pillows and blankets are dragged out of storage rather than stolen from any one specific bedroom, spread out over the biggest space on the floor of the flight deck while the autopilot cruises The Endolphin through unoccupied space. All the lights have already been dimmed, only the softest glow from the open doors to the rest of the ship left for them to see by when Soobin finally flops down in the center of the pile, a happy little sigh from him all Kai needs to climb in beside him.

He hesitates at first to get too close, but the temporary pause doesn’t last, because in the next second Soobin has rolled over to grab him around the waist and bundle him down into the thick of the mess.

His fingers dig into Kai’s sides, finding soft gives in the silicone easily, familiar places where the general feel hasn’t changed enough for him to realize at first that what he’s doing will have no effect, and Kai only barely registers what he was aiming for before Soobin pulls away again. He hides his grief better this time, the flash of it in his gaze only lingering for a moment before he shakes it off and forces on a smile that doesn’t mould the dimples into his cheeks. “Lucky you,” he huffs, and Kai pretends he only hears the feigned amusement and not the ache behind the words, “I guess I can’t tickle you until you scream anymore.”

Kai rolls his eyes. “You say that like it was fun for me in the first place.”

“Don’t lie,” Soobin hushes, his smile softening into something more genuine when Kai meets it with one of his own. “You loved it.”

Stupid. “I loved you,” Kai corrects.

He clams up as soon as it slips out, every bit of him locking in place as he realizes what he’s done.

Next to him, Soobin’s eyes widen, his lips parting around a rough inhale.

There’s no warning to it, no buildup, the moment lightning struck as one minute they’re just staring at each other, and the next Soobin has closed that awful chasm, taken Kai’s face in his hands, and kissed him. It’s a fierce thing, the sort of kiss Kai suspects would have left him utterly breathless before, but he only feels the pressured press of now. “Don’t say it like that,”
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Soobin chokes, the plea hitting the air between a second and a successive third kiss. “Like it’s- like it’s in the past, like it’s- like it’s *over*-”

In the end, the thing Kai’s been dreading hurts so much less than everything that comes with it. He knew from the moment Beomgyu found him in the cell that it would never be the same, his useless excuse for a heart already torn from his chest just by the thought. And he was right, of course. Soobin kisses him like he needs it to survive, digs his teeth into Kai’s lower lip as though he’s starved, licks into his mouth like he’ll never get another chance, but that’s only the lowest rung of Kai’s agony.

It’s the desperation that kills him, the obvious longing in every motion, a passion that surges in Kai, too, but can’t escape the confines of his remade body.

Somehow, it’s so much worse than he ever could have imagined it would be.

He has to be careful when he kisses Soobin back, cautious as he cards a hand through his hair, cradles a palm to his jaw, ever aware of the possibility of putting too much into it all and hurting him. Memory alone guides him, the instinct no longer there when he can’t feel it, can’t drive himself on the ghost of the sensation. He remembers the thrill though, the way even just kissing had tingled something beneath his skin, and he tears open those cobwebbed boxes at the back of his mind to draw upon something more specific.

Kai fits a palm to Soobin’s back, and flips them, gratified when he earns a telltale, breathless huff. Soobin stares at him for a second, eyes hooded and chest heaving, and all it takes is him reaching for him again for Kai to give in.

One year isn’t quite enough to outweigh six, Kai thinks viciously as he slots their mouths together, chases after every gasp Soobin drags in that he no longer has to mirror. He knows this man better than he knows himself, has all his little gives and tells memorized. Soobin likes being pinned down, likes being marked. He craves to be adored, desires to be held to the point of bruising, and begs for praise when he starts to fray apart. Kai knows him.

They know each other.

He pulls away when one of Soobin’s hands starts skating down his chest, his abdomen, Kai’s fingers curling around the captain’s wrist as he stops him.

“I do love you,” he murmurs across the corner of Soobin’s mouth. “*I do.* I didn’t . . . I didn’t mean to make it sound like it was past tense. I’m so sorry.”

The hitch of Soobin’s breath is audible, and Kai doesn’t have to open his eyes to know what kind of expression he’s wearing. “But . . .” he whispers, the prompt for everything they both understand Kai’s not saying.

Kai can’t look at him. He *can’t.* It’ll only make this worse. “I don’t mind kissing you,” he says as he sits up, putting a little more space between them because he really, truly needs it right now. “I’m . . . Glad, that you still want to do these kinds of things with me. And I like being close to you, but . . . Soobin-ah . . .”

He doesn't have to finish it, Soobin's pained inhale of realization saying more than Kai could ever manage to. "*Kai-ya . . .*"

It takes all of Kai's effort to crack an eye open, to take in the unfiltered anguish in Soobin's expression before he collapses on top of him again and burying his face against the other man's chest.

He wonders if he would have relished in it all more if he'd known the experience would be limited. Would he have really treasured the feel of their bodies together? Or would he still have taken it for granted, wasting that precious time because it wouldn't be his forever.

"*Kai-ya,*" Soobin repeats, and Kai sobs around tears that won't come, the truth of the loss finally, finally gripping him in full.

He's living in a museum of his own life, able to look but not touch, the glass of his synthetic body barring him from every affection he'd foolishly thought would be his til the day he died. And in a way, he supposes that's true. It was his. He did die; a hole shot right through him to spill too much blood for him to ever be human again.

Soobin traces out shapes over his back, the press of his fingers as he does it purposefully hard as Kai shakes apart in his arms. "It's okay," he chokes out. "It's okay. I just- I'm just glad you're *here,* Kai. I don't- I don't *need . . .*"

That doesn't matter. "But I *want to,*" Kai wails. "*I want to!*"

He wants to be able to kiss Soobin and feel it, wants to be so consumed by the press of skin on skin that it leaves him breathless. He wants to be so tangled up in him that he forgets where one of them ends and the other begins, wants to be warmed by beating hearts and heated affections.

Kai wants, and wants, and *wants.*

And it's not just Soobin, either. These are things he can't share with *anyone* anymore, no amount of love enough to bring it back.

He'll spend the rest of his days, however many the universe decides to give him, whether he's there for another week or until every star burns out, just like this; clawing at the scraps of sensation and grasping at memories that will likely fade.

It's all a farce. All of it. He'll never actually kiss Soobin, or Yeonjun, or Taehyun, or *Beomgyu* ever again, not really. At best, he'll pretend, indulge them, and that'll be it. It was never about need, or necessity, because of course those things aren't a measurement for whether or not Kai is loved. But he feels unwhole without them, an outside viewer to his own pathetic excuse for the existence he's been left with. And it will never, ever be enough.

Kai gasps around another ragged, anguished sound, the tremble that wracks through him chased away as Soobin traces out another spiral across his back. "Love you," Soobin murmurs fiercely against his cheek, a kiss pressed there so hard that Kai jolts. "*Kai-ya,* I love you *so much.*"

There are things in the universe that will never change; the force of gravity, the theory of relativity, the inevitability of death, and Kai hopes, desperately, that this too is one of those things.

“Love you, too,” he mumbles weakly into Soobin’s shoulder.

If he has nothing else, at least he has this. Taehyun, and Yeonjun, and Soobin, who are hurting just as much as he is, maybe even more.

Kai tries not to think about what it must be like to hold the cold shell of a person, burying his face against Soobin’s neck in an attempt to soak up enough heat to keep them both warm.

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Four days slide by in much the same manner. Kai wanders around the ship for awhile in the morning, then checks into the med bay to let Taehyun poke and prod at him for a few hours before they both head down to the bridge. He spends some time feigning interest in his work, the bare minimum that he’s allowed to do turning monotonous far too quickly, and then he paces the ship again until everyone settles down for the night.

He does not look at Beomgyu.

He doesn’t enter his own quarters where he knows Yeonjun is still sleeping.

He doesn’t peek into the now abandoned big bedroom.

Soobin drags the tangle of pillows and blankets out onto the deck two more times before they finally get around to actually doing “exactly” what they used to.

“Endolphin,” Soobin says through the veiled darkness, a hand raised dramatically into the air above them as they lay amidst the piles of bedding. “Pull up Earth’s winter star map.”

The heavens explode around them, the Milky Way taking shape within the confines of the flight deck, and Kai can’t help the gasp that parts his lips even though he’s seen it all before. Familiar constellations find their places, rotating into position overhead until they settle and still, winking distant replicants of gas giants and faraway systems Kai knows like the back of his hand. He uncurls himself from Soobin’s side, unwinding their limbs out of the comforting array he’d twined them in for the sake of proximity moreso than sensation.

Suddenly, nothing else matters anymore.

“I’ve missed this,” Kai croaks weakly, his eyes already finding shapes and outlines that are burned into his mind, the last vestiges of a guide back to a place he never knew.

Soobin’s hand finds his between them, the hum of acknowledgement he lets out vibrating against the silicone over Kai’s knuckles as he presses a kiss there. “Me too. Do you want to play *that* game?”

Ah. That game. Kai rolls over to look at him, propped up on an elbow as Soobin reaches to run the fingers of his other hand through the fibres of his hair. “Can we change the rules?”
~~~

“Of course.”

Kai smiles, relief in his chest. There’s no point, really, in playing this the way they used to. “Why don’t *you* name the constellations this time,” Kai says, “and when you get them right, I give *you* a kiss.”

If Soobin minds this, the fact that Kai has outlined so clearly what he is and isn’t okay with, he doesn’t show it. There’s no point, after all, in Kai receiving any such prizes. But he can dole them out.

That’s the one saving grace in all this, Kai supposes, the act of giving still just satisfying enough to him that it soothes a bit of that ache that lingers in everything else he’s missing.

Soobin flops back into the pillows, dropping the hand from Kai’s hair to lift it instead to point out the nearest set of stars. “Bunny,” he states, grinning when Kai lets out an aghast scoff.

“Soobin-ah,” he scolds. “That’s Lepus. Be serious, or you won’t get anything from me.” He scoots closer to kiss him anyways, a quick, chastising peck to the corner of the other man’s mouth.

For some reason, Soobin is frowning at him when he pulls away. His eyebrows have furrowed, and his gaze flicks over Kai’s face for a long second before he casts his attention back at the imitation stars overhead. A finger points at another constellation, further up and to the left. “Big Pizza.”

“Big Pizza,” Kai repeats, glancing up. “Um, try Monoceros?”

The hand tangled with his tightens. Again, Soobin looks at him, the crease between his brows deepening. “Don’t be mean,” he says, the tone not quite teasing, bordering on something else entirely. “Come on, Kai-ya.”

Kai blinks, “I’m not being mean,” he replies, confused now. Oh, wait, he hadn’t rewarded that answer with a kiss, had he. Quickly, he gives Soobin another butterflied peck. “Stop answering wrong, and maybe you’ll get a better prize,” he chides.

The manner in which Soobin is staring at him is off. That’s the only way Kai can think to describe it. The affection hasn’t dissipated from his eyes, but it’s starting to lurk lower down, overshadowed. Slowly, he turns back to the star map, his hand faltering for a heartbeat before it lifts to trace out the shape of Orion in the air above them. “Superman.”

Huh?

“Orion,” Kai corrects.

It’s amazing, really, how abruptly everything can go to shit. Kai should know better by now, with how much he’s lived through, how many times he’s tricked himself into thinking things are fine just seconds before they all fall apart. He’d once clutched a hand to the center of his chest, right over where a hole had been ripped through him, only steps away from the hope that he’d make it out alive. And yet, somehow, he still can’t quite believe it when Soobin

shoves at him, the harsh, vicious press of his palms to Kai's sternum sending him sprawling back into the blankets littering the flight deck as the other man scrambles to his feet and away from him.

Something's wrong.

Something's *really wrong.*

"Soobin-"

"Who are you?"

Kai tries to sit up, but Soobin takes another two steps back, tripping as his heels tangle in the pillows and he tumbles over onto his ass. He doesn't stop moving through, still trying to put distance between them even as Kai hitches out a hoarse, "What?"

Soobin is breathing hard, every inhale and exhale audible. "Tell me you're joking," he pleads, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes as another one heaves through him.

"I . . ." Kai starts, stumbles. What is there to joke about here? He thought they were playing a game. "I just . . . We were naming the constellations."

Soobin's eyes widen, his already stricken face paling further. "No. No, *no,* ***no***. Kai-ya, please . . . Come on, it's . . . We've never called it Orion. Say it right. It's Superman."

"I don't . . . I don't know who Superman is," Kai whispers, dismay creeping into the very core of him.

Something's wrong.

And it's *him.*

"Y-you're *not* Kai."

It's the last thing Soobin says before he scrambles to his feet again, vaulting across the room to the center console to slam a hand against one of the buttons. Kai covers his ears as the alarms shriek into life. The star map vanishes in an instant, replaced with the red blare of flashing lights. Soobin skirts around the edge of the room on unsteady legs, eyes never leaving where Kai has stayed on the floor from when he'd pushed him away. He gets his back to the doorway, fumbling behind him to press his spine firmly against the arch of the awning, an action Kai recognizes as one born of genuine terror.

Yeonjun makes it to them first, standing in the entrance to the bridge for only a second before Soobin lunges for him.

They'd been in their pajamas, comfortable, unarmed. But Yeonjun has entered the situation with all of his sharpshooter tendencies, including the blaster hastily holstered to his hip.

Kai freezes as Soobin swings it around towards him, shaking finger already on the trigger.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” Yeonjun screams, stepping forward while Soobin takes two steps back, jerking an elbow towards him as he shifts the blaster to his other hand, never letting the barrel of it leave where it’s pointed directly at Kai’s head. “That’s *Kai!*”

“No it’s *not,*” Soobin spits, vicious, anguished. “I don’t know what you brought back, but that *thing* isn’t Kai. I-” He chokes, an awful, strangled sound of grief that sends a tremble through Kai’s entire frame. “I grew up with Kai. I-I’d know! That’s not him!”

Yeonjun tries to snatch the blaster back a second time, but Soobin kicks him, forcing him away. “It is Kai,” Yeonjun pleads. “It is. Don’t you think we’d know, too, Soobinie? Come on, it’s just . . . It’s just been a long week. You’re stressed, tired. Give me the blaster, baby. *Please.*”

Soobin snarls. “*No!* I’ve been tired for a *year,* hyung! One more week doesn’t make a difference! That’s. Not. *Kai.*”

Someone slams into the captain from behind, and Soobin shouts as the blaster is knocked from his grip to clatter across the floor. He dives after it, Yeonjun on his heels as they tumble down together. The scuffle barely lasts a second, another sharp shout, from Yeonjun this time, before Soobin wrests control back and sits across the other man’s chest, the blaster in hand once more when he points it Kai’s way, and gasps around a horrified sound at the new sight he’s met with.

Kai hasn’t moved, his palms still clamped over his ears to drown out the continuous wail of the alarms, his eyes wide as he stares at where Beomgyu has crouched in front of him, arms held out to his sides as he faces Soobin down.

“Beomgyu-ya,” Soobin croaks.

Beomgyu sucks in a jagged breath that Kai can see visibly rattles him, even with just the view of his back to go by. “You gonna shoot me too?” he goads darkly.

Soobin doesn’t lower the blaster. “Beomgyu-ya. That’s not-”

“Fuck you,” Beomgyu growls. “You don’t get to decide that on your own. I don’t care if you’ve known him longer than the rest of us.”

Soobin tenses. “Ask him, then. Ask him that! Ask him how long he’s known me!”

It’s the first time Beomgyu’s looked at him in days, the slow glance over his shoulder weighted as he prompts, “Kai-ya . . .”

Even before he opens his mouth, Kai knows the answer is going to be wrong. “S-seven years.”

From the floor, pinned down by Soobin’s knee, Yeonjun hiccups out an agonized sob. "Hueningie, *no* . . ."

It's wrong. Everything is *wrong.*

Tears well in the corners of Soobin’s eyes, his shaking finger on the trigger again. "*You're not Kai.*"

"Shoot him, then!" Beomgyu snaps between them. "Kill him!"

"Move!"

"No!"

Soobin is trembling so badly that the blaster can't stay steady. "It's not Kai," he repeats, more of a mantra now than a declaration, the edges of it strained like a prayer. "It's not. When have- have *any of you* even heard him laugh since he came aboard!? That's not Kai!"

It's true, Kai realizes with a sickening jolt. Soobin’s right. He hasn't laughed. Not once. And it’s not as though he hasn't had ample opportunity or reason, Kai’s never been the type to let a grim situation weigh him down so much that he can’t find a little humor in it. He's been amused, found things funny, and yet . . .

For some reason, none of this seems to matter to Beomgyu though, the vicious snort he lets out making Soobin flinch. Kai tries to protest as Beomgyu presses further back against him, shielding him now so thoroughly that not even Kai’s shadow can be seen around his body. "Beomgyu-ya," he whispers

"You want to kill him," Beomgyu hisses, "then you have to live with losing me, too."

A bang rings out in the room, and Kai falls to the floor again as Beomgyu tackles him down. His hands scrabble at the other man’s back, searching for the slick of blood he knows he won’t be able to feel, dreading the wounds his fingers might slip into, and finds nothing. "Beomie," he chokes. "Beomie, where-"

Beomgyu shakes his head, sitting up to pat down Kai's chest in the same way Kai had done his back. "Not me. Are you okay?"

If it wasn’t either of them . . .

Kai grips the front of Beomgyu’s loose t-shirt like a lifeline as he turns his head to see Taehyun standing in the threshold to the room, a type of gun Kai doesn’t recognize held in both of his steady hands. "Catch him, hyung," is all he says, before Soobin slumps listlessly towards the floor.

Yeonjun jolts upright, one shaking arm barely saving Soobin from knocking his head on the metal tiles. "Fuck. *Fuck,* Taehyun-ah, what did you do?!"

Taehyun straightens, one arm lowering to his side and taking the gun with it. "What I had to," he grits out. Beneath the flash of the alarms, Kai spots him load a second dart into its chamber. "It's just a tranquilizer, he'll be groggy tomorrow, but he'll live."

Running a hand through Soobin's sweat soaked bangs, Yeonjun whispers, "What about Kai-ya?"

Taehyun spares Kai a long, assessing glance. "What about him?"

Yeonjun balks. "He doesn’t . . . Taehyunie, he doesn’t *remember*."

"And?" Taehyun intones. "We all knew this was a possibility. What do you want me to do about it, hyung, turn back fucking time?"

He's angry, Kai recognizes, they all are, hurting with that same sore knowledge that had driven Soobin to point the blaster at him.

"If you're really that worried about it," Taehyun says thickly, "we can put it to a vote. All in favor of jettisoning Kai-ya out into the cold depths of space, shout 'aye.'"

Only the persistent alarm echoes in the room. Not even Soobin responds, though Kai can see that he has one eye cracked open, his chest dragging in long, shallow breaths as he slowly turns to press his face against Yeonjun’s ribs.

"Cool," Taehyun bites out, "that's settled then. Now who wants to bring our illustrious captain to med bay, and who wants to take the resident amnesia victim to their room?"

"I've got Kai," Beomgyu mutters, his fingers curling so tight around Kai’s forearm that he almost feels the phantom pain of the grip.

Across the room, Yeonjun sighs, "Alright. I guess I'm with Soobinie, then."

Taehyun claps his hands together around the grip of the tranquilizer gun. "Perfect. Which leaves Endolphin to shut off the alarm."

The lights dim again, the flashing and siren sounds fading as the ship’s artificial night closes in around them, the sudden silence not quite deafening enough to drown out Soobin’s quiet, muffled sobs.

Chapter End Notes

The Superman quote is from one of my favorite issues, and if you'd like to read the scene in full, here's the link:

http://imgur.com/gallery/Ijdxh

As always, if you liked this chapter please leave a comment! Comments are my source of fuel to keep writing!

Chapter 3: Three

Chapter Summary

> The universe has never been fair, nor kind, but still Kai finds himself surprised by how cruel it can be. If he has neither a body or a mind, what else is there for him to define himself by? He's not Kai Kamal Huening, not like this. Soobin is right.
>
> Soobin is right.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night before everything goes wrong, Kai spares no thoughts for the future. Why would he? He's spent his entire life living in the moment, ever aware of how unsteady even tomorrow might be. Any second could be his last, any hour or day, and with that in mind, his instinct is always, *always* just to grasp onto what he already has, drink it all in for as long as he can, and try his damndest not to let go.

Which is why when he enters his room after a stressful last minute runthrough of the mission's gameplan, only to find Beomgyu sitting on his bed, he doesn't hesitate to pounce.

Beomgyu laughs as they tumble over onto the mattress, his hands already wandering over Kai's back, tugging at his shirt before his back even hits the sheets. "Eager!" he chides, low and warm, as if he wasn't explicitly *waiting* for this.

They all have their tendencies, their personal, adrenaline driven whims. Kai never forgets that they're soldiers first, and people second, but god damn does he try. He has them all memorized, every tiny hitch and tell and mannerism burned like a brand into his brain. Soobin tends to keep to himself before missions, pacing the bridge and sleeping poorly, only accepting the most chaste touches as if anything else is too much of a distraction. And while Yeonjun gets handsy, grabby, he doesn't stray into anything more than that, keen instead to cling and nuzzle into any offered embrace. After, though, when they're all still keyed up and half terrified that death's snapping on their heels, he'll break. Meanwhile, Taehyun fluctuates, shifting between seeking out something more in the quiet lulls amidst the bustle of preparations, and withdrawing entirely, focused on the task and liable to get snippy if anyone tries anything.

Beomgyu, though . . .

Well, Beomgyu and Kai always end up here.

Sometimes Taehyun joins them, but usually it's just the two of them, tangled up in each other and hyper aware of how easily it all could end.

“Careful, *careful,*” Beomgyu hisses between his teeth when Kai grips a palm around his right thigh, pressing it back. His foot knocks into Kai’s ribs, and he bites his lip to stifle a sound that isn’t in any way pleasant. Kai freezes.

“Is your ankle still bugging you?”

Beomgyu shakes his head, a denial that will haunt Kai for the rest of his life. “No. It’s only a little sore, m’fine. Just go easy on me, yeah? Some of us are on the away team tomorrow,” he reminds cheekily.

Kai arches an eyebrow, “I always go easy on you,” he goads, which is *such* a lie. With Beomgyu’s shirt rucking up under his hands, he can see quite clearly the proof of that, the greenish tint of an old bruise on the other man’s hip in the exact shape of Kai’s thumb. Beneath him, Beomgyu snorts, amd the noise makes Kai snicker easily in return. “Alright,” he laughs, “I’ll be nice.”

He grins when Beomgyu rolls his eyes, demanding fingers tugging at Kai’s hair. “I didn’t say ‘be nice,’ I said ‘go easy,’ you monster. Unlike you, I don’t get to sit around the ship all day, I have to *walk* tomorrow.”

“Picky picky,” Kai teases.

Contrary to his words and the fading marks on both of their skin, though, Kai has no intentions of being rough tonight. He never is before a mission, too desperate instead to relish in everything else to give in to the urge. Beomgyu knows that, too, his own remarks affectionate rather than scolding, like the first steps to a waltz they’ve danced a hundred times before. After awhile though, even that fades away, replaced by the overwhelming desire just to be as close as possible, skin to skin, sharing breaths moreso than words. And as much as Kai likes manhandling Beomgyu when they have the time, he loves this even more.

“Careful,” Beomgyu whispers again, his face mostly turned away, a pinkened cheek pressed into the pillows of Kai’s bed. “Careful.” His fingers grip the sheets, white knuckled. With how they’re laying, Kai’s chin tucked into Beomgyu’s shoulder, an arm thrown over his middle to keep him close, he can see the way his chest heaves around every breath. Kai stills, turning to nibble at the taut line of Beomgyu’s throat instead. He’s barely gotten the head of his cock inside, but Beomgyu’s already trembling like it’s too much, overwrought in a way Kai understands all too well.

If you live enough of your life scared shitless that the end might swallow you whole before you’re ready, the little things are often more than you can bear. They tend to sneak up on them, just like this, when they expect it the least, a grim reminder of how much they have to lose.

Kai soothes a palm up Beomgyu’s abdomen, over the space just under his ribs and then across his sternum, a trail carved to mimic the pathway of kisses he leaves along his neck and shoulder. His other hand is too tight on Beomgyu’s hip between his body and the bed, but neither of them points that out.

Beomgyu hitches on an exhale, twisting to bury his face further into the pillows to the point that Kai almost slips right out of him, and his resulting swear is muffled into the fabric. “M’okay,” he mutters, and while Kai already knew that, it’s still a relief to hear. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Kai murmurs over his skin. “We can stop, if you need to. I’m just happy you’re here.”

He expects the answering growl, but relishes in it nonetheless. “*God,* why do you always make it sound like I’m doing you a favor?” Beomgyu complains into the pillows. “Shut up.”

Obligingly, Kai decides not to give that brattiness a response, instead nuzzling into the crook of Beomgyu’s shoulder again. By now, he knows he only has to wait, weather that quiet storm, and eventually they’ll both settle down again. Because it’s not just Beomgyu that’s struggling, it’s Kai, too, his wandering hands giving him away with their greed, the all-consuming neediness to touch and be touched while he has the chance. He skates them over Beomgyu’s chest, glides them down the sides of his ribs like his very bones are piano keys to be played. His fingers squeeze around Beomgyu’s waist, just this side of bruising, an unwitting reminder of the urgency that exists in every moment, and he has to take a breath, exhale it over already heated skin, as he holds himself still. Sometimes, Kai feels like his greatest enemy is himself, that vicious, possessive flare that burns through him hot enough to hurt, even from the inside out. It’s selfish, probably, to feel that way when they have greater purposes than what they give to each other, but he can’t help it.

If it were up to Kai, the five of them would have abandoned Meon Jigu and the arcs a long time ago. Fuck duty. Fuck humanity. Fuck the universe.

He already has all he needs.

A hand tangles in his hair, and Kai lifts his face from where he’s been trying his damndest to practically burrow into Beomgyu’s shoulder, aching ever to be as close as he possibly can. “Hey,” Beomgyu breathes, “stay with me, Hyuka.” There’s a testy note to it, as though Kai’s handsiness, the slight quiver in his limbs, is an inconvenience. But he hears the undercurrent of a plea, and hums in affirmation as he carves another map of kisses over the other man’s neck. “You wanna move now?”

“M’not even all the way in you yet,” Kai reminds, and he smirks into Beomgyu’s neck when he gets a miffed little huff for his cheek.

“Yeah? And whose fault is th- *ah!*” Beomgyu’s back arches when Kai rolls his hips, his hand that isn’t twisted into Kai’s hair falling to the arm that’s resettled around his waist, nails leaving crescent bites along Kai’s wrist. His mouth snaps shut, teeth digging into his lower lip as he stifles a moan and rocks back into the movement, seating himself completely.

Kai leaves his bruising spot on Beomgyu’s hip in favor of splaying his fingers over his stomach, silently encouraging him to repeat the motion. Beomgyu does so without hesitation, and Kai chokes on a deep groan. “*Fuck,* s’good, Beomie, s’perfect.”

“D-don’t get all slurry on me already,” Beomgyu chuckles, the hand in Kai’s hair pulling until Kai tightens his arm around his middle and starts to move with him. “Come on, Kai,

we've barely started."

He's right, of course, but Kai just answers the teasing with a muffled hum into the curve of Beomgyu's shoulder. It's not like either of them will finish anytime soon, not at this pace, and after a minute Beomgyu's grip on his hair starts to loosen. He grasps for Kai's arm around his middle instead, following the line of it down to where the fingers have curled over his waist, and winds them both together as he shifts to press his face into the pillows again. Kai chases after him with the next roll of his hips, a chastising drag of teeth over Beomgyu's throat that leaves him panting.

Normally, the pair of them tend to be chatty even during sex, quips and jibes traded back and forth, fierce affections marked out by even fiercer tones. But it's always different on nights like these, bruises and bites exchanged instead for something slower, softer, both of them achingly aware of the ever looming threat that brought them here in the first place. Beomgyu's usual candor stays low, what little noise he does make for once not enough to escape the confines of the room. He buries his hiccups and whimpers in the sheets, and the few demands he voices are sighed out on his exhales.

Soft.

Softer.

Slow.

Slower.

Kai hears it when Beomgyu hits his limit, the hitch in the tiny whine he tries to hide in the pillow his only warning before he's being shoved at, pushed onto his back as Beomgyu has him pull out and scrambles to straddle him instead. "Oh?" Kai purrs, delighted when Beomgyu scowls down at him, unamused by the feigned surprise. This is how they always end up, afterall.

"Shut up," Beomgyu huffs. He takes Kai's hands in his, guides them back home to his hips before he shifts up onto his knees, one palm falling to spread broad over his partner's sternum as he uses the other to help ease Kai's cock back inside him. His eyebrows knit together as soon as he bottoms out, mouth falling open on a curse that's barely audible as he starts moving. He's chasing his own pleasure now, quivering as he starts to slump forwards against Kai's chest once he seems to find the angle he needs.

Kai rolls up to meet him, watching through half lidded eyes. Beomgyu's fingers claw at his skin with every movement, his breath tinging the air in hoarse and husky pants as he bows over him, the dark curtain of his hair tickling Kai's cheeks. He's almost there, Kai realizes, and he starts to shift a hand towards Beomgyu's neglected cock, only to pause as the other man viciously shakes his head. "Don't," he chokes. "Just like this. I can- *mm!*- j-just like this."

Oh.

He's really drawing it out this time, Kai thinks dizzily, his gaze glued to each rise and fall of Beomgyu's body above his, eyes memorizing everything from the way he bites his lip to how he twitches when Kai tightens his hold on his hips, urges him down again that slightest bit harder. His chest is starting to sting from the dig of the other man's nails across his skin, but he ignores it, enraptured as Beomgyu suddenly tenses, a broken moan leaving his lips just as he shudders apart. The hand on his ribs slips, and Kai fumbles to keep him as upright as he can, stunned when Beomgyu's bitten back sound turns into the familiar cadence of his name.

"F-fuck, *Kai.*"

That's all it takes before Kai loses his already fraying self control. Beomgyu gasps as he abruptly lands face down on the bed, choking on an overstimulated whine as Kai drives back into him. He doesn't protest though, hiccupping through a garbled, almost incomprehensible mantra of, "Fuck, *fuck,* ***Kai****, yes,* fuck!"

Uncaring of the mark it will leave, Kai snaps his teeth in the soft space between Beomgyu's shoulder blades when he comes, grunting as he hilts himself to the base and spills deep, *deep.* If Beomgyu minds, he certainly doesn't show it, the loud shout that rings through the room suggesting the opposite. His only sound of discontent is made when Kai starts to pull out, one trembling hand grasping behind him to get a fistful of Kai's ass and pin him in place.

A startled laugh bubbles from Kai's lungs, and he gently pries the insistent hand off, leaning over to press a lingering kiss to the imprint of teeth over Beomgyu's spine. "Not tonight," he chides, snickering at the string of swears he gets in return. "Beomie," he scolds when Beomgyu again tries to keep him from going anywhere, "seriously, you'll be no good to anyone if I wear you out."

Reluctantly, Beomgyu releases him, collapsing into the sheets with another muffled curse when Kai leaves him empty. "Asshole."

Oh for-

Kai sighs and nudges at his hip for him to roll over, but Beomgyu resists, clearly more than a little miffed at him. "*Beomie,*" he murmurs as he settles for trailing further kisses down the tense line of his partner's back. "*Don't.* You know we shouldn't."

Beomgyu tilts his face in the pillows just enough to shoot Kai an absolutely withering glare over his shoulder, and then slumps back down into the thick of them, his hands clenched in the sheets beside his head.

Well alright then.

Kai sighs, his attempts at soothing the abruptly thick atmosphere stalled. He swings his legs over the side of the bed and fumbles for a pair of boxers on the floor to pull on. As always, the halls of The Endolphin are blindingly bright in the middle of the night, the contrast between the cool dark of their quarters and the rest of the ship excruciating as Kai trudges his way to the bathroom and back again.

Beomgyu is exactly where he left him when Kai returns. This time, he isn't so nice with his gentle insistence that the other man roll over onto his back, and earns a furious yelp when he manhandles him into it anyways. "You're being a brat," Kai snaps, all amusement for the situation vanishing as he pins Beomgyu's hands over his head and uses the warm washcloth he brought back to clean the mess off his abdomen. Beomgyu, apparently above being reprimanded, aims a kick at him when Kai attempts to part his thighs, and yup, okay, that's enough of that.

He spins around to sit on Beomgyu's chest, satisfied when he receives the startled huff of a forced-out exhale for his efforts. "Hey, remember that time you bitched at me for almost an hour about providing proper aftercare?" he reminds smoothly.

"I'm going to bite your ass," Beomgyu hisses, but he stills, and Kai's grateful when he stops fighting him.

By the time he tosses the washcloth aside to let him go, Beomgyu's thrown an arm across his eyes, and when Kai leans over him to try and move it, he just rolls away onto his stomach again, bundling himself right back into the messy sheets.

Good lord.

This is not, of course, the first time Kai, or any of them for that matter, have been in this situation. Beomgyu has a tendency to take even the smallest rejection personally, whether it be in bed or otherwise. Luckily, though, that means Kai knows exactly how to deal with it.

"Come on, Beomie," he soothes, easing an arm beneath Beomgyu's tense frame, and another under his knees. Something flutters in his chest when Beomgyu immediately loops his arms around his shoulders. He only grumbles for a moment when Kai hefts him up, the majority of his focus concentrated on burying his face into the crook of Kai's neck.

The big bedroom, as they've oh so aptly and creatively dubbed it, sits at the center of the line of doors on this side of the ship, right in the middle of the cluster of their more personal quarters around it. Kai trudges that direction almost entirely on autopilot, exhaustion already creeping up on him by the time he bumps an elbow into the control panel and fumbles his way through getting the door to accept his passcode. It slides back, and Kai slips into the welcoming low glow of a single dimmed overhead light, smiling as he's met with a very familiar pre-mission sight.

Soobin and Taehyun are already out cold, tangled up in each other on the left side, though Kai only recognizes that Taehyun is even there at all by the puff of blond hair that's sticking out from the depths of the blankets, the rest of him burrowed too far under Soobin's form and the bedding to make out. Yeonjun, however, is still awake, perched on the end of the bed and running an errant palm over an old, long and vicious scar on his chest that stretches from his left shoulder down to the right base of his ribs. Even though a few years have passed sonce ot was earned, Kai knows it has a tendency to pull too tight after a strenuous day, and from the sweat still beaded on Yeonjun's forehead, he's only just started to try and settle down for the night. He glances up when Kai enters, his initial look of surprise melting when he takes in the full sight before him.

"Oh no," he grins, "looks like you have A Sulk on your hands."

Beomgyu's arms tighten around Kai's shoulders, a rough exhale huffed out into the crook of his neck.

"Just a bit," Kai hums. "I figured making a sandwich might help."

"*Nooooo,*" Beomgyu whines against his skin, but it's a halfhearted protest at best.

Yeonjun scoots back on the bed, careful not to disturb where Soobin and Taehyun are peacefully sleeping, and Kai kneels on the mattress to follow. Beomgyu squirms when he lays down with him still wrapped up in his arms, but the second Yeonjun settles in behind him, tucking his chin into his shoulder, he freezes. Propping himself up on an elbow, one hand still splayed over Beomgyu's back, Kai watches through half-lidded eyes as the other man slowly starts to uncoil. "There we go," Yeonjun murmurs, a kiss pressed to the hinge of Beomgyu's jaw. "See, baby bear? You're alright."

"I *know that,*" Beomgyu grouses. Regardless, when Yeonjun pulls him back into his chest and nuzzles over the nape of his neck, he practically melts.

Kai doesn't let them get far without him, throwing an arm over both men as he shifts closer and nips his teeth into the curve of Beomgyu's throat. "We know you know that," he assures. "We're just making sure."

"By squishing me?"

"You love being squished," Yeonjun laughs. "Look at you, BG, you've gone all gooey on us." He eases a hand under him, fingers brushing beneath Kai's ribs when he says, "So, what heinous crime did you commit this time, Kai-ya?"

Beomgyu grumbles something that sounds distinctly offensive, and Kai ignores it in favor of nibbling at the soft spot under his jaw again before he answers the question. "The usual," he returns between breaths, focused now on the task at hand, listening for Beomgyu's soft, drawn out exhales that give away just how affected he is.

"The usual, huh?" Yeonjun teases. "Don't worry, Beomie, we'll make it up to you tomorrow once we're all back aboard."

Kai smirks, another fervent, satisfying kiss nuzzled into Beomgyu's cheek. "Definitely," he agrees.

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Bemgyu sits heavily on the edge of his bed, a grimace pulling his lips taut as he does so. "Well?" he snaps. "Are you just going to stand there all night?"

Kai winces from where he's stayed with his back pressed against the doorway, further twisting the hem of his t-shirt between his trembling hands. His eyes dart around the room. It's not as cluttered as he remembers, almost oddly sparse, even. Still, it's as cramped as any
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of their single-occupant quarters, and there isn't really anywhere else for Kai to linger than where he already is. "S-sorry," he starts, "I can go out into the hall . . ."

"And give Taehyun-ah another excuse to be pissed at me?" Beomgyu snorts. "Yeah, no thanks. Fine, stay there and stare. It's not like everyone else doesn't."

For a moment confusion overrules Kai's hurt, and he starts to open his mouth to insist that he really probably should just leave when Beomgyu shoves the waistband of his black uniform pants down and kicks them across the room, and Kai gets it. The fact that he can't help the startled, hoarse noise that escapes him doesn't help matters, either.

The other man's prosthetic leg ends a little ways above the knee, and even in the dim lighting of the room, Kai can see the scarring that extends much further up, the twist of puckered skin, and it's already too late for him to try and cover his reaction.

"Yup, super gross, huh," Beomgyu deadpans. He's fiddling with something near the seam between metal and skin, and after a beat Kai hears a hiss of air as the thing pops off, a sound Beomgyu echoes as he slides it all the way free. Beneath it, Kai's met with the full sight of what's left of Beomgyu's actual leg, including the mess of purpled bruising the attachment was hiding, still striped through with scarring that's pink enough in places that Kai knows it isn't all as well healed as it should be by this point. Knowing Beomgyu, he probably hasn't given it the time it needs, pushing himself more than he should, and Kai chokes on another awful non-breath as it hits him exactly why.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

"Take a picture," Beomgyu says lowly, abruptly, cutting Kai's spiraling thoughts in half, "maybe it'll last longer." He leans back, his hands braced behind him on the mattress as he strikes a pose. "Here, I'll even make it look good." With a thumb and forefinger around his chin, he flashes Kai a vicious smirk. "Looks especially stunning with the side profile, doesn't it?"

"Beomie . . ." Kai starts. He doesn't know what to say. Should he apologize for staring? There's clearly no point, Beomgyu's already pissed, and it's clear from his earlier remark that Kai is, unfortunately, not the only one who's been caught doing so.

He expects the way Beomgyu's cold smile only hardens, but that doesn't make it sting any less. "Forget about it, Kai-ya. At this point, I don't really give a shit."

Well, at least Kai's not the only one aboard The Endolphin prone to lying these days.

Beomgyu uses the mattress to leverage himself up onto his foot, the prosthetic tucked under one arm as he leans over the headboard to place it in a battered looking charging stand that's been mounted into the wall above the bed. He sits back down with a heavy sigh the second it's set, hands dropping to gingerly massage over the mottled stub of his leg with a grimace before he spares Kai a glance out of the corners of his eyes. "So, where do I plug you in?"

Uh . . .

“Nowhere?” Kai hedges, suddenly unsure. For some reason, he’s never even thought that there’s a possibility that he might need to be, uh, reenergized in any way. Surely if that were something necessary to his continued cybernetic survival, Taehyun would have said something . . . Right?

Right!?

With another sigh, Beomgyu pats the bed beside him, "Stop freaking out. I'll just pull up Taehyun-ah's notes and double check, okay?"

"I'm not freaking out," Kai denies. He shakes his head when Beomgyu pats the mattress again. "Of all the things for me to freak out about tonight, this is, like, at the bottom of the list."

For a third time, Beomgyu smacks a palm to the bed beside him, firm enough in its insistence that Kai doesn’t dare continue to ignore it, lest Beomgyu decide that getting up and forcing him to sit is his only remaining option. So, reluctantly, Kai trudges over and lowers himself onto the mattress, barely balanced on the edge as Beomgyu grabs a tablet from the low table nearby.

The silence that settles as Beomgyu taps away at the screen is just as suffocating as it's been all week thus far. Kai fixes his gaze on his knees, shoulders hunching the longer it stretches on. He needs to come up with a better excuse to leave, a chance to slip away into some lesser used storage room or something so he can curl up on himself for awhile. It hasn’t really hit him yet, he thinks over the distant lull of Beomgyu flipping through diagrams and notes as they pop up on the glass, but it probably will soon. And when it does, the last place he wants to be is here, in Beomgyu’s room, the two of them unable to even look each other in the eye for more than a second.

"Here we go," Beomgyu hums, and Kai chances a glance at the tablet where a three-dimensional model of his own heart is on full display. "No charge necessary, you've got whatever the fuck this thing is whirring away inside you."

Kai squints at the screen. It's certainly . . . Something, alright, a tightly wound ball of energy that seems to be putting off a spinning, dense heat signal. He blinks at it. "What is that?"

Beomgyu shrugs. "Dunno. Some kind of stolen Gigye bullshit. But according to Taehyun-ah's notes, he doesn’t seem to think you'll be running out of juice anytime within the next twenty or thirty millenia. So you're fine."

If Kai had the capability, he's sure he'd feel nauseous at the nonchalance of that statement. "Twenty or thirty *millenia?*" he croaks. Fuck, it’s not like he hasn’t had that thought himself already, but it’s definitely a lot worse coming from someone else's mouth, let alone Beomgyu’s. "I . . . I don’t *want to* . . ."

He lets the confession fall flat, unfinished and stale in the air. It's already a nightmare enough as it is without him voicing how awful he finds the idea. He doesn’t dare look at Beomgyu either, even more terrified of the sort of expression he might find on the other man's face. What would be worse, pity? Or apathy.

"You'd think something like that buzzing around in your chest would be noisy," Beomgyu muses, and Kai is somewhat grateful for the slight change of topic. "And hot."

Tentatively, Kai presses a palm over the left side of his ribs. It's a really stupid thing to do, he realizes immediately, hand dropping back into his lap as he whispers. "I wouldn't know."

He hears Beomgyu shift on the bed, and startles as he catches sight of a hand reaching into his view, fingers almost brushing over his clavicle before Beomgyu stops short, jerking back as if scalded even though he hadn't touched Kai at all. The whole thing happens in a split second, uncommented on when Beomgyu returns his unsteady grip to the tablet, a thick exhale breathed out through his nose. "Do you want the bed or the floor?" he mutters.

Kai shivers, "Floor. It's not like I'm going to sleep, anyways."

". . . Right."

They're really going to leave it at that, huh. Kai tilts his head back to stare up at the ceiling, the dim glow of the lights and the familiar pattern of tiles. He might be in shock, he decides, only the barest excuse of a shudder rippling through him as that thought finds space in his mind. It's probably for the best that he is, then. Anything else is less than ideal right now while he's trapped in a tiny bedroom with the one person who so clearly doesn't want him there at all.

Well, one of two. Kai's pretty sure Soobin would probably prefer to never be anywhere near him again. The whole pointing a blaster at his head thing had made that pretty clear.

"I think . . . You guys should drop me off at the next resistance outpost you stop at," Kai whispers.

The silence, if anything, only grows heavier. "Why would we do that?" Beomgyu says, and Kai can't read the low inflection in his tone.

Why the hell wouldn't they? "Soobin's right. I'm not Kai. I'm . . . A piece of him, maybe, the leftover bits."

"Yeah, well," Beomgyu snaps, "that makes two of us. Welcome to the fucking club. You'll get used to it, eventually." Kai finally chances a glance in his direction, but Beomgyu just turns away from him, tugging a blanket from the other side of the bed and throwing it around his shoulders as he collapses into his pillows. "Go to sleep."

"I can't," Kai reminds.

"Then sit on the floor and pretend," Beomgyu grumbles. "I don't care what you do, just do it somewhere else. Without leaving the room," he adds, twisting around long enough to pin Kai with a shockingly sharp glare. "Taehyun-ah said you need to stay here."

"Okay."

He slides off the mattress to the tile without further protest, drawing his knees up to his chest as he leans back against the bed frame. Somehow the room feels darker from down here, the

dull blue glow from overhead only serving to cast even more shadows, mould the shapes of furniture into monsters and veil Beomgyu's shallow breaths until Kai has to strain to hear them. It had been easier to feign sleep on the bridge, the night lulled into quiet, listless hours, the passage of time measured by the rise and fall of Soobin's rib cage under Kai's hand. It had been a luxury, Kai realizes, one he no longer has. And once again, he didn't think to treasure it while it was well within his grasp.

Although, maybe, that was never something that was even his in the first place.

He's lost too much of himself after all.

It's slow, the way the events of the last hour wash through him, a tiny trickle of confusion gathering into a flood, one little drop at a time. At first, it starts with just that small thought, that distant realization that when he'd said seven years, he'd meant it. Kai claws his way through his memories, or what few of them remain, desperate to find a concise starting point, a low, anguished sound leaving him when he realizes how literal that confession had been. He hits a wall too easily, mind blank as he tries to recall anything prior to first seeing The Endolphin in the hangar of the arc he'd spent most of his life on. Even that is just a fuzzy thought though, an off, faint knowledge that yes, a good portion of his childhood was there without the actual substance to back it. It fades even further when he tries to think of what came before the arc, what few recollections he can find of Earth just simple facts, entirely impersonal.

Did he have a family before the arc? He must have. Most people did. But Kai can't remember them. Why would he, when he can't even remember Soobin.

That awful, choked epiphany echoes through his head, the all consuming grief in Soobin's tone when he'd yelled that they'd apparently grown up together.

Desperately, Kai sifts through everything again, meticulous in a way he's not sure a human mind could ever be as he rummages around inside his own head for the knowledge that, quite simply, just isn't there anymore. There's nothing, not a single scrap to back up Soobin's words other than that vague sense that Kai knows, deep down, that he's right.

He and Soobin have always been together, for as long as he can remember, even if that timespan now only encompases seven short years. Kai hits the wall again, that steel cutoff point he can't tear down no matter how hard he tries, suffocating anguish choking him.

God, they already took everything else about him, why couldn't they have just left him *this?*

There's nothing before The Endolphin, an empty void where Kai knows there must have been so much, a black, black pit that's swallowed half of all Kai used to be. And it's not just Soobin, of course, he realizes with further mounting agony, it's all of them. His first memories of everyone seem to start mid-thought, the familiarity already solid. Kai chases after the threads of them, only to discover the red strings frayed at the ends, severed short.

He can't recall who kissed him first.

The cogs of his mind lock up around the faint idea of a promise, but there's nothing to back it up.

Panic grips Kai anew, fiercer than ever before. He's been holding himself together on the idea that, if nothing else, at least he has his memories. Except, it turns out, he doesn't have those either.

There's nothing, Kai thinks, not a single fucking thing remaining to tie him to even the *concept* of who he used to be. How is he meant to endure existing when there isn't anything left for him to cling to. The Gigye let him keep only what they might one day find useful, scraps that slip through Kai's fingers no matter how tightly he tries to hang on to them.

The universe has never been fair, nor kind, but still Kai finds himself surprised by how cruel it can be. If he has neither a body or a mind, what else is there for him to define himself by? He's not Kai Kamal Huening, not like this. Soobin is right.

Soobin is *right.*

The grief hits him all over again, harsher than it ever has until Kai can't help but gasp out useless, breath-like imitations as he shudders through it. What is there even left for him to call human? He's *nothing.* A thin seven years clad in a Kai-shaped shell, an atomic heart putting on a faux show of something alive. Kai shudders, heavy trembles wracking through him, his vision flickering in the muted dark of Beomgyu's room. It's too much, this time, the rush of anguish sparking through him with such intensity that, if Kai didn't know better, he would almost dare to say it hurts. But this is the only kind of pain he can feel now, isn't it, the sort that rips him apart from the inside out, too foreign for a body no longer meant to bear the weight of it.

Kai buries his head in his hands, his knuckles brushing his knees where they're pulled up to his chest, letting out one loud, audible sound resembling a sob, and lets it consume him.

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"What is wrong with you!?"

"Do you want a fucking list? Cause I'm pretty sure there's a really professional one sitting around with my name on it in the med bay, if you're curious."

There's a beat, a pause where only ragged breaths ring in the air, and Kai hates that even in the silence he can hear how broken the atmosphere is.

"I can't believe you," Taehyun says, the accusation vicious, thick. "I know this is hard for you, but I didn't think you would take it out on him like-"

"I didn't do shit."

"Exactly!" Taehyun snaps. "You just laid there while he broke down!"

"I came and got you, didn't I!?"
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Kai cracks open his eyes, just a little, just enough to make out three blurry shapes standing over him. Someone has moved him to the bed, a blanket tucked around his prone form and his head carefully laid among the pile of pillows beneath the headboard. He tries to shake the static fuzz from his brain, blinking as it clears enough for his vision to stop flickering and reveal the other figures in the room.

Beomgyu and Taehyun are practically standing on top of each other, Taehyun's hands white knuckled in the front of Beomgyu's rumpled uniform blacks and blues. His face is neutral, bland despite his furious tones, the opposite of the way Beomgyu's lips are curled in an outright snarl, his fingers clawed where he's gripping Taehyun's wrists. "It's not like he told me!" Beomgyu spits. "I didn't know anything was wrong until he made that noise, okay! What the fuck else was I supposed to do!?"

"You know *exactly* what you should have done," Taehyun hisses lowly. "And if you weren't so fucking stubborn, you-"

In his grasp, Beomgyu squirms, kicking out with his right leg, and Taehyun grimaces as the metal knocks against his shin. It's that that finally makes Yeonjun, who's been watching it all unfold from a meter or so away, step in. His fingers are firm when they close around Taehyun's arm, firmer still when they force the other man to release his hold on Beomgyu. "Taehyun-ah," he starts, his other hand flattening for a moment over Beomgyu's sternum to continue easing the two apart.

Even in the muffled, half conscious state Kai's found himself in, he can see Beomgyu's whole face twist up, the flash of awful, unfiltered agony that's there too starkly to be missed before it's gone. He stumbles back from Yeonjun, chest heaving in a strangled little breath before he acidically says, "Oh, so *now* you want to touch me?"

Yeonjun freezes, his hand still held out in the air where just a second prior it had been splayed on Beomgyu's chest. ". . . Beomgyu-ya . . ."

Beomgyu laughs, short, bitter, choked, his fists clenching at his sides. "Fuck you. Both of you, seriously. I'm not your stupid cyborg babysitter for you to only pay attention to when you've decided I'm useful. You," he points at Taehyun, his finger shaking, "should have never let him back on the bridge. You knew the risks. And *you,*" he tips the gesture in Yeonjun's direction, his lips pulled back in an absinthal smile, "don't you even fucking start with me. You have *no* right. None. Understand? *Fuck you.*"

"Beomgyu-ya," Yeonjun tries again, an awful, audible ache in his tone as he lets go of Taehyun to reach for Beomgyu again.

Kai flinches, squeezing his eyes tightly shut when the outstretched hand is slapped away, the crack of Beomgyu's knuckles knocking roughly across Yeonjun's palm rending right through him.

"Seriously," Beomgyu growls, "don't touch me. Don't fucking even try to do that shit, like you care, like you . . ."

He draws off, and Kai watches Yeonjun's already stricken face pale further. "Beomgyu-ya . . ." He whispers, the syllables hitched, weak and wet.

Beomgyu ignores him, his shoulders drawn up when he shifts to look right through him to Taehyun instead. "It was an accident," he intones, utterly inflectionless. "Just tell me what I have to do to help him, and then you can leave."

"I don't think . . ." Taehyun draws off, lips pursing around whatever he'd almost said. "Maybe Kai-ya should stay in the med bay, too."

Snorting, Beomgyu snaps, "With the guy who just tried to kill him? No."

"I don't see how that's much worse than him staying here with you," Taehyun mutters stiffly. "You think the rest of us haven't noticed that-"

"Don't even think of finishing that comparison," Beomgyu hisses. "It's not the same, and you know it. I would *never*-"

"Yeah?" Taehyun's eyes glint as he starts to step into Beomgyu's space again, only kept at bay by the way Yeonjun's shaking hand stops him, trembling where he grips Taehyun's wrist. "Because yesterday, I probably would have said the same about Soobin-ah, too, you know. And look how that fucking turned out."

Kai sits up. It's a slow process, every limb seeming much heavier than it should, even considering what he's made of. He feels oddly numb, which is saying a lot, like this entire conversation is happening far, far away, and he's barely even a spectator. Everyone else stills when he moves, and Kai curls an arm over his knees as he draws them up, his forehead dropping to rest on the curve of it. He should probably say something, he figures, but the words don't come, his mouth as empty as head. That same, grief-leaden weight is hanging in his chest, threatening to drag him down again, and Kai has half a mind not to fight it.

"Kai-ya," Taehyun whispers. The mattress dips, and Kai can't help but lean into that fleeting pressure of a hand as it cards through his hair and settles on his cheek. "You're awake."

"Mm," Kai agrees, not trusting his voice enough for more. That, too, feels faint, detached from the rest of him even moreso than normal.

A thumb strokes over the hinge of his jaw. "I'd ask how you are," Taehyun murmurs, "but I don't think I really need to. You look like a wreck," he says, and despite the teasing tone, Kai can see the genuine worry that clings nakedly to his expression.

He shivers.

Taehyun's eyebrows furrow. "Oh, *Kai* . . ."

"Maybe he *should* go to med bay," Yeonjun says quietly.

"You're not taking him to fucking med bay," Beomgyu snarls, the insistence punctuated by the ever present thrum of The Endolphin's engines as the room falls silent again. "He's staying *here.*"

“Why?” Taehyun grits out between his teeth. “So you can sit back and watch when he has a panic attack again? How the hell are you planning to help him when you-”

“Oh, shut up,” Beomgyu laughs, a thin, broken sound. “Pretending nothing’s changed doesn’t give you some stupid moral highground, asshole.”

If Yeonjun weren’t still standing between them, Kai figures Beomgyu would have crowded into Taehyun’s space again, right onto the bed, heedless of Kai himself caught in the middle. His vision flickers when he looks away, training his gaze on a blank spot on the wall, his ears straining for that low, comforting hum of The Endolphin’s engines, desperate to drown it all out again. As it had before, the urge to just let go finds him, sinking its teeth right into the dregs of his thoughts and tugging, a cold reminder of how easy it would be to simply shut down. He’s not equipped for any of this anymore, the tangle of emotions that’s caught amidst the weave of synthetic things his body is made of meant for someone distinctly more human. But even that’s just a distant impulse, low simmering as Kai lets his head drop back to his forearm across his knees, his eyes falling shut.

Someone squeezes his hand.

It takes him awhile to register it, that far-off pressured sensation overshadowed by everything else for a few minutes until the roaring in Kai’s ears has died down enough that he realizes the room has gone quiet again. Kai blinks, tilting his cheek against his arm to stare down at where Yeonjun’s fingers have interwoven with his, prying him away from the vice-like grip he’d held in the blankets. “Hey,” he whispers when Kai meets his eyes. “Stay with us, sweetheart.”

“M’trying,” Kai returns, even though that’s not quite true. He’s not fighting it as much as he should, he knows, but he also isn't sure if he can. A tremble ripples through him when Yeonjun gives his hand another squeeze.

Yeonjun smiles, a thin, sad little farce of an expression that only serves to make Kai ache that much worse when he says, "I know, baby. I know you're trying. But we're all really, really scared of losing you again, so I need you to try a little harder. Okay?"

Kai blinks, then blinks again, his sight continuing to glitch and blur. He tries to reply, wants to deny the subtle accusation, but all that escapes him is a choked little noise. Yeonjun meets it with tightening his grip on his hand, his other palm soothing over Kai’s back, phantom glimpses of a ghosting touch, and Kai shivers in the wake of it.

"Kai-ya," Taehyun whispers, his palm cradling Kai’s cheek again, fingers brushing into his hair. He doesn’t say anything else, just that soft, urgent note of Kai's name, continuing to card through Kai’s hair. He's not asking for anything, Kai realizes, not pressing Kai to provide either an explanation or a solution. He’s just . . . There. And that means more than Kai's sure he knows.

"We've all had a pretty rough night," Yeonjun murmurs, "haven't we." Understatement of a lifetime. Kai cracks a wavering smile of his own, not missing the audible breath of relief Yeonjun huffs out through his nose. "There you are."

"Kai-ya," Taehyun repeats, still so soft. "I'm sorry."

Huh? "What for?" Kai asks.

Taehyun's whole face screws up, the crease between his brows deep. "For fighting in front of you," he says, hushed. "You're . . . You're *sick,* Kai-ya, and that wasn't helping anything. I'm so sorry."

What a simple way to put it, Kai thinks hazily. He's sick, the tangled up remains of what was once a person, caged into a prison with a human shape. He's just . . . Sick. That's all.

"Baby," Yeonjun says again, sharper this time, and Kai chokes on a startled, upset sound as Yeonjun jolts Taehyun aside to take his face between his hands, tilt his head up. "*Kai,* come on, stay here, okay? Your eyes are . . ."

Oh. Kai blinks slowly as his vision falters again. He wonders what it looks like, how off putting it must be to see the illusion of his very soul flicker and reveal the truth. "M'sorry," he slurs. "M'trying." He means it a little more this time, Yeonjun's palpable fear striking an uncomfortable chord in him. A tremble wracks through his frame, and Kai reaches to find something more solid to hang on to, some gravitational force to keep him where he should be. His fingers curl around Yeonjun's wrists, but it's not enough, another shiver forcing a whimper from his lips, an awful, helpless sound he wishes he could take back the moment it meets the air.

"*Kai,*" Taehyun chokes, scooching across the blankets to lean into his side. "I don't know what to do," he says, the confession hitched as he fits a hand to Kai's opposite hip, presses the three of them closer together. "What can I do?"

The mattress dips behind him, in that barely there space between Kai's back and the headboard, and Kai freezes as a pair of arms wrap around his middle, the weight of a body suddenly solid against his spine.

Oh.

Oh . . .

"Like this, right?" Beomgyu says thickly, his face pressed into Kai's shoulder blade. "Every time one of you has eased him into settling down, it's been like this."

"It has?" Taehyun whispers, stunned.

"You didn't realize?" Beomgyu mutters, an old, almost teasing lilt sparking into his tone. "All your notes kinda spell it out, Taehyunie."

"Just hold him?" Yeonjun asks, hoarse. "That's . . . That's it?"

Against the nape of Kai's neck, Beomgyu snorts. "Yeah? You say that like that isn't exactly how you get through your panic attacks, too."

". . . Or your moody periods," Yeonjun returns.

Kai bites his lip as Beomgyu tenses, the arms around his waist tightening. He doesn't say anything, but Kai feels the vibration from the heave of an inhale he takes before he twists his face away from the other man, burying it in the crook of Kai's shoulder. "We should take him to the big bedroom," he huffs, the stiff words tinged with an ache Kai is starting to become far too familiar with.

Yeonjun hums a low, agreeing note as he combs his fingers through Kai's hair. "Is that something you want, Kai-ya?"

Kai's not sure he's ever wanted anything more. "All of us?" he asks, wincing at his own wavering hopefulness.

From where he's still curled against his side, Taehyun sighs. "I'll help get you settled in, but I can't stay. Someone needs to be with Soobin-ah, and I . . ." His hands that have tangled with Beomgyu's around Kai's middle tighten. "I made you a *promise,* Kai-ya."

Kai's glances at him out of the corners of his eyes, unwilling to shake Yeonjun's hold enough to give him his full attention, even as what Taehyun's referring to sinks in. That's right. He had, hadn't he.

He'd promised to stay with Soobin when Kai couldn't.

Kai nods as he thumps his head down into the crook of Yeonjun's neck. "Thank you," he mumbles, and means it with every fiber of his being. In all likelihood, Soobin will never want to see him again, and if Kai can't be with him when he needs it, well . . . Someone should.

Someone should.

"Alright, Hyuka," Yeonjun soothes near his ear when he shivers again, his hands falling to curve under Kai's thighs. "Let's go."

He only recognizes what Yeonjun's going to do a split second before it happens, and Kai squeaks in surprise as he's tugged into the other man's lap, and then up into his arms as Yeonjun stands. "No no no!" Kai yelps. "I'm too heavy!"

"Nonsense," Yeonjun grunts, only securing Kai's shaking legs around his waist more firmly. "You're light as a feather."

Liar. Yeonjun puffs out a long breath, but doesn't seem to have any intentions of putting Kai down, so Kai wraps his arms around his shoulders rather than protest. It's not like it'll hurt if he gets dropped, and Yeonjun's already dug his heels in on the matter, so there's no point.

The short walk down the hall to the big bedroom takes longer than Kai's sure it should. Then again, Kai's painfully aware that he's losing time again even as he thinks that. Beomgyu's hand is in his hair, soothing the caramel strands from his eyes whenever Kai shifts enough to peek at him, and it isn't until after, when he's finally being set down on the edge of a dust-free mattress, that he realizes exactly how long he must have zoned out. He tilts his gaze to the left to spot Taehyun tossing the old sheets into a corner, but can't focus on it when Yeonjun smoothes a thumb over his chin, quietly urging him to turn his way instead.

“Hey,” Yeonjun murmurs. “There’s those big eyes.”

Kai stares at him. “Did I shut down again?”

Beomgyu sits beside him, close enough to touch without actually doing so, one of his hands white knuckled in the sheets between them. “No. Pretty damn close though, from what I could tell. You couldn’t hear us calling your name. But Taehyun said we’d know if something was wrong, and well, having seen it . . .” He draws off, a sharp, unreadable grimace carving its way into the corners of his mouth.

Swallowing around nothing but reflex, Kai can’t help but whisper, “I’m sorry,” but to his alarm, that only seems to make Beomgyu tense up further.

Yeonjun commands his attention once more, a gentle nudge to his jaw urges Kai’s eyes his way. “Don’t apologize, sweetheart. It’s not your fault.” He says it so easily, like it’s nothing, and for a moment Kai almost believes him until he spots that haunted, hollowness in his eyes when he speaks, and it hits him what they’re avoiding telling him.

It makes sense, though, that Kai would look like he’s dead when his body shuts down.

“Let’s get you comfortable, okay?” Yeonjun goes on, that unsteady tenor still bleeding into the words. “Then maybe we can all get a little rest.”

Kai lets himself be manhandled around on the bed, still save for the persistent trembles that he can’t seem to help while Yeonjun situates him at the center of the mattress. Distantly, he tries to recall if he’s ever ended up in this exact spot before, squished into the middle of the five of them, and then lets that thought fade before it can wear on him any more deeply than it already has. He thinks he might have, but there’s no point in dwelling on it when he can’t even remember far more important things; first meetings and first kisses and first . . .

“Stop that,” Beomgyu growls as he curls up against Kai’s back, an arm thrown over his waist. He doesn’t wait for Kai’s confused inquiry on what he means. “Whatever you’re thinking about that’s making you shake *worse,* stop it.”

"Don't yell at him," Yeonjun whispers as he tucks himself along Kai’s front, a hand pushed up under Kai's shirt near his waist. The skin there must be cold, Kai thinks mutedly, but he doesn’t say so, instead burying his face in Yeonjun’s shoulder in an effort to soak up some of the warmth he can't feel.

"I'm not yelling at him," Beomgyu snaps. "I'm just-"

"Both of you, stop," Taehyun's voice grits out. He's standing at the bottom of the bed, Kai notes when he peeks an eye open to seek him out, a blanket half unfolded in his hands, as if he'd been about to toss it over the lot of them. "If the pair of you are going to fight all night, I really will take Kai-ya back to med bay. He’d be better off there than stuck listening to you two go at each other like this.” Kai can feel Beomgyu’s glare even though it’s not directed even remotely his way, the room suddenly deathly quiet as his arm around Kai’s middle draws tighter. Taehyun doesn’t flinch in the face of it though, merely cocking an eyebrow high, challenging, before he throws the blanket over them. “Seriously,” he scolds, “this isn’t

about you right now. Either of you," he clarifies when Yeonjun starts to open his mouth. "So if you can just set your shit aside for a few hours and think of *Kai,* I'd appreciate it."

"Don't act like you're any better," Beomgyu mutters into the back of Kai's neck, but it's so quiet Kai's not sure anyone except him even heard it. Taehyun at least doesn't bother to acknowledge the remark, and Kai watches as he crawls across the bed to reach for him, run an apologetic hand through his bangs before pressing a quick kiss to his temple.

"I'll come get you as soon as I can get Soobin settled in his own room tomorrow," he murmurs, "alright?"

Kai stares at him, the words foggy as they filter through his ears. "I don't want to go to med bay," he manages weakly.

Taehyun's expression twists, a flash of guilt and dismay visible before he schools it again. "It won't be for very long," he promises. "But it's necessary. I need to make sure you're okay, Kai-ya. We still don't really know why you keep shutting down."

And Kai gets that, he does. Still, though, he can't help but utter another strained, "I don't . . . I don't want to go to med bay."

His eyebrows furrowing, Taehyun looks to Yeonjun, the question hanging in the air unspoken. "We'll figure something out," Yeonjun says softly. "Just worry about Soobinie for now, okay? We've got him."

Kai buries his face against Yeonjun's shoulder so he doesn't have to see the doubt he knows he'll find in Taehyun's eyes, his focus narrowing to the faint thud of a heartbeat he can barely feel where his hand is pressed to Yeonjun's back, and the pressured weight of Beomgyu's arm over his middle. They're still talking, a few more minutes of quiet back and forth exchanged before he hears the door to the room slide open and shut again in quick succession. Another harsh, involuntary tremble washes through him, and Kai winces as he hears Yeonjun's startled, answering grunt, the palm splayed high on his ribs flexing.

"*Baby,*" Yeonjun breathes out, alarm thick in the single syllable of the affection.

Beomgyu's grip on him tightens, but he doesn't offer any similar platitudes.

"I d-don't know what's w-wrong with me," Kai chokes out. It's never been this bad before, even when he'd first woken up. Then again, he hadn't tried to fight it then. There's every chance he's making things worse by clinging to consciousness, but he can't say that. Not to Yeonjun at least, not after the other man had plead with him to stay awake with that awful, audible terror in his voice. Kai can't do that to him, not like this.

If he leaves, he wants it to be of his own volition, and not due to something he can't control. It'll be easier on them that way, he figures, if it's by choice, the grief lessened by the knowledge that Kai made that decision all on his own.

For now, though, he wants to be here, even if he has to claw apart his own stupid excuse for a body to do it.

Yeonjun leans their foreheads together, one hand rising to cradle Kai's jaw, stroke a thumb over his cheek. "We can try counting again," he whispers, and Kai hates the palpable fear that's bleeding into every word. He can't shut down like this, not in front of Yeonjun. He *can't.* "Do you think you can manage it?"

Reluctantly, Kai shakes his head. He's not focused enough to try, his thoughts flighty as it is even when all he's grounding himself with is that too-foreign illusion of touch pressed in all around him.

"I can do it for you," Beomgyu mumbles. His voice is distinctly hoarse, and Yeonjun sucks in a harsh inhale as he tucks his chin into Kai's shoulder, but Kai can't bear to open his eyes to find out why. "I . . . I'll tap against your chest," he goes on, rapping his knuckles roughly against Kai's sternum, hard enough for the vibration of it to rattle against the metal beneath his synthetic skin. Kai jolts, just a little, and Beomgyu's other arm tugs him that extra bit closer, their bodies flush together now, his prosthetic leg tangled between Kai's. "You can focus on that, right? Like this?" He does it again, and Kai jerks his head into a stiff, frantic nod as the motion minutely ripples through him, his own trembles stilling for a single, off beat before they start up again.

"Okay," Yeonjun soothes. He's still nose to nose with Kai, and Kai grasps onto the front of his shirt with the hand not desperately tracing out the thunder of his heart, twisting the fabric so fiercely he's sure it tears. "One . . ."

Beomgyu drums his knuckles over Kai's chest. *Two,* Kai thinks, his lips pursed.

"Three," Yeonjun whispers.

Another tap, gravitational, reorienting. *Four.*

Yeonjun sucks in a low inhale, and Kai whimpers when a kiss is pressed to the corner of his mouth. "Five. You're doing so good, Hyuka baby. You really are."

Beomgyu knocks another beat against him, and Kai mumbles out a shaky, "S-six."

"There you go. Seven."

He's hurting himself, Kai realizes as he utters an unsteady, "E-eight," the force with which Beomgyu raps his knuckles to the center of him surely bruising for Kai to feel it as well as he does. He tries to catch the hand, stop him, but Beomgyu growls out a ragged, "*Don't,*" into his neck, and Kai falls still again, drawn back into the universe by the reverberations that echo out beneath the point of contact.

Again, he loses count, minutes drifting away as he figures out how to inhabit his body again. By this point, Kai almost finds it funny, in a terrible, dark sort of way, the act of coming back to himself so akin to taking hold of a ship's controls that it's grimly amusing. He blinks a few times in the darkness, reorienting himself by sight alone. One of Yeonjun's hands is in his hair, but he can't feel it, noticing only when he shifts to prop himself up on an elbow and it slides from the strands to the sheets. Yeonjun frowns, the line of it distressingly deep, but

when Kai stares down at him he's unsurprised to find him asleep, which means it hasn't been minutes, like Kai had initially thought.

It's been *hours*.

He sits up, the blanket pooling around his waist as he gently eases himself out from beneath Yeonjun's arm. Without Endolphin, he can't check the time, and he's unwilling to call her since doing so will likely wake Yeonjun up. Carefully, Kai tucks the blanket back around him, wary of any potential chill he can't register. It's only as he's doing so that he finally realizes that they're alone in the room.

Beomgyu is gone.

Kai lets the dull, heavy hurt sink into him slowly, closing his eyes as he slides to the edge of the bed so his feet can brush the floor. He can't say he's shocked, far from it, really, but that doesn't really do much to ease the ache. Even when he'd been trying his damndest to help him, Beomgyu had clearly done so begrudgingly, his tone and body tense the entire time. It had been obvious that he would have rather been anywhere else, and Kai figures it's a miracle he'd stuck around as long as he had, really.

There's probably another few hours yet til Yeonjun wakes up, and maybe even longer still before the rest of the crew starts their day, given everything that's happened, and Kai is loathe to sit and stew in his miasma of thoughts for that amount of time. Now that he's back in his own head, he might as well pretend to be useful.

He slips out of the room without disturbing Yeonjun, tapping out a quick message for him on the panel by the door before he goes, lest he panic when he wakes up. Once he's out in the hall he considers calling Endolphin again, and the syllables are almost fully formed on his tongue when he pauses as a sound hitches audibly in the air.

Kai freezes as soon as he hears it, already knowing deep in his faux heart what that noise is even just by the short, gasping note of it he managed to catch. He whirls, eyes widening as he spots one of the bedroom doors laying open.

Beomgyu's.

It takes everything he has to move forward, to not just flee back the way he came, and even then he almost runs anyways. It's none of his business anymore, is it. He has no right to check on him. None. Beomgyu has made it obvious where they stand, hasn't he. But he has to. He can't not.

Kai can't listen to a single second of Beomgyu crying and not try and make sure he's okay.

He keeps his steps quiet as he approaches, hugging the wall as he reaches where the door is locked in its open position, the light from the hall bleeding into the cramped bedroom beyond. Kai peeks just enough around the awning to see inside, and immediately wishes he'd stayed where he was to fester in his thoughts.

Beomgyu has his back to him where he's sat on the bed. His prosthetic has been discarded on the floor, the heap of it suggesting it was thrown rather than carefully set aside, and the bruised stub of his leg is sporting a new, rawer, pinker mark along the scarring. He must have worn it for too long, Kai realizes, having to put it back on twice in one night in a manner that was probably rough, rushed, both times to attend to *him.* Guilt is already thick in his chest before the full, unfiltered sound of Beomgyu's sobs truly start to make themselves known.

The other man heaves around every stuttered, wet breath he takes, shoulders shaking, and his face pressed into something he holds in his hands that Kai can't make out the shape of in the half-light spilling in from the hall. He hiccups harshly, chokes like he can't get enough air, shuddering as he does so, the instinctive motions, Kai knows, of someone who's been crying for so long they can't remember how to stop. And that's all Kai can bear to see before he has to look away, squeezing his eyes shut as he presses his back to the wall outside and tries to stop the tremble that threatens to overtake him.

He knows, deeply, intrinsically, that this is his fault. It isn't even a question at this point, there's nothing else it could even be, really. Beomgyu is crying because of *him.*

It's so easy, Kai thinks as he strides away, down the hall, past the room that's no longer really his, past the big bedroom, to hit a breaking point. He knows he's been toeing the edge of it for awhile though, putting on fake smiles over even faker assurances. Truthfully, he's pretty sure he might have only held on as long as he has simply because he was made to.

If Beomgyu hadn't stood in front of him, if Taehyun hadn't had that tranquilizer, well . . .

It wouldn't have been a bad way to go, Kai thinks with some kind of bitter hysteria, a grim, high sound bubbling out of him as his steps guide him to where he wants to be almost entirely by autopilot. In a way, it would have been romantic, taken out by his first love. Poetic, considering Kai can't remember if that definition of him and Soobin is even actually true.

They can't be mad at him, not like this. He's been dead from the beginning, existing in his own, hellish realm outside of mortality for over a week now. They can't be upset, not when it's his own choice. Not when he has the right to make that decision.

"Kai-ya, what are you doing?"

Kai blinks, turning away from the panel his fingers are flying over to see Endolphin hovering near his shoulder. "I didn't call you," he hisses, uncaring if he's harsh.

She stares back at him, and for a moment, Kai imagines that her big, round eyes look sad. She's gone in the next instant, almost as if she was never even there at all, the light particles of her hologram dissipating into the air.

Teeth clenched, Kai turns back to what he was doing. Predictably, the passcodes for the ship's single airlock have been changed in the year he's been gone, and with his admin privileges revoked, he has to go about this the hard way. Luckily, the one fucking thing the Gigye seemed to have left him with is his intelligence, and after five tries, Kai smirks to himself as the big, toothed door starts to open.

A rush of trapped air escapes into the hall, and Kai ducks under the door before it's even fully up. There's another panel inside, flashing a bright, warning red, and Kai presses a palm to it to activate the decompression protocols, his shoulders stiff as he takes in the glare of the seconds starting to count down.

It's not like he hasn't already thought about it, back in the med bay before he'd even fully woken, floating around the idea of what this would be like. Space is cold, and vast, and Kai isn't made of anything that will shut down right away once he's out in it. He figures he'll drift for awhile at the very least, too small to be affected by the gravity of distant stars and far off planets. It'll be peaceful. Quiet. He won't have to think, and better yet, no one will have to think about him, either.

No one will have to decide if there's enough left of him to call by name.

No one will have to cry over the imitation of the person he used to be haunting the halls of the ship they all once call home.

And no one can blame him for it, either. He tried, he really did.

Didn't he?

Two minutes. The door is almost shut, and Kai stares at the meter gap left, and shakes his head to turn towards the glass on the other side instead, eyes fixed on the sight of constellations he can't name.

"No no no no *no no* ***no!***"

Kai jumps as something clanks loudly in the airlock, metal screeching on metal, and he whirls as a sharp, pained curse echoes through the room.

Beomgyu glares up at him from where he's caught under the door, his prosthetic leg trapped, absolute fury radiating from every centimeter of his body. There are still tears in his eyes, streaks on his cheeks, and when he squirms to try and get his leg out he swears again, clawing at the smooth tiles on the floor of the airlock. "Fuck you!" he spits when Kai continues to stare. "Help me up, asshole!"

Unthinkingly, Kai does, hooking two hands around the base of the door and lifting it just far enough for Beomgyu to slide fully into the room. The door groans as soon as he's out, and Kai lets go as the pressure of it trying to close makes his arms creak audibly, dangerously. Almost as soon as he does, Kai realizes what he's done, panic gripping him.

Fuck.

Fuck.

"Beomgyu-ya," he croaks, horrified.

Beomgyu snorts, an acidic, almost laugh as he pushes to his knees, and then to his feet, limping heavily. The lower half of his prosthetic is twisted, and he grimaces down at it for a moment before he folds his arms over his chest and levels the panel to Kai's left with an

unimpressed look. “Wow, a whole minute left? Nice. Plenty of time for me to chew you out before we die.”

Fuck.

Kai lunges for the panel, frantically typing in the emergency code.

“Oh, don’t stop on my account,” Beomgyu huffs.

The countdown stalls, and Kai heaves out a sigh, knees weak as he shoots a glare over his shoulder at the other man. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” he hisses.

“What the fuck is wrong with *you?*” Beomgyu snaps back. “What were you thinking!?”

Kai bristles. “Don’t- I- I don’t have to explain myself to you,” he chokes out. “I should get the right to- to decide when I’m . . . When I’m *done.*”

Beomgyu’s eyes narrow, his stiff posture only tensing further. “You’re going to kill Yeonjun-ah, you know,” he says lowly, shockingly vicious. “It won’t matter if it’s your decision or not.”

Scoffing, Kai says, “Like you care.”

He’s not blind. Or deaf. He didn’t miss the obvious clues that point to the glaring, heart-wrenching fact that Beomgyu and Yeonjun aren’t together anymore. The same way Kai and Beomgyu aren’t, either. In fact, Kai’s almost certain that Beomgyu isn’t with *anyone,* not after the only person he’d even been civil with had pointed a blaster at him.

Kai jolts, stumbling back when Beomgyu closes the distance between them to grab the front of his t-shirt, fisting it tight in his hands when he leans into Kai’s space to snarl, “Of course I care!”

Hilarious. Kai’s upper lip draws back, a poor imitation of a smile set in place when he says, “You don’t have to lie to me. It’s fine. I don’t want anyone pretending that they give a shit about me, you know. Actually, it’s better that they don’t.”

“Yeonjun-ah *loves you,*” Beomgyu growls, “and I refuse to let you do this to him. I will drag you to the fucking holding cells if that’s what it takes. Don’t think I won’t.”

Kai just blinks down at him. The countdown might have stopped, but he feels like he’s already not even here, adrift in space, looking back at a world that’s no longer his. “Fine,” he relents. “Then I’ll shut down. I could do it right now.” It won’t be the same kind of peace, since Kai suspects it’ll be temporary, but he’s not picky at this point. He can probably keep doing it, over and over, until they finally just let him go.

That’s all he wants, now.

“You *can’t,*” Beomgyu says, and for a second Kai almost convinces himself it sounds like he’s pleading. He shakes him, as much as he can manage to anyways, Kai’s really too heavy for that. “I didn’t- I didn’t fucking spend the entire last year of my life putting myself through

this shit, pushing Taehyun-ah to let me back on the bridge, and then nearly getting killed in that god damn Gigye outpost for you to do this to me, do you hear me!?"

Kai glances away from him, out at the sea of stars, the words a distant, dull outcry and nothing more.

"Kai-ya!"

Faintly, Kai wonders how long it takes. He doesn't bother to try and keep track, let alone guess, the minutes during which Beomgyu shakes him, as though he might knock some sense into Kai's head, a muffled roar in his already muted senses. Eventually, though, he must realize.

There's nothing he can say to change Kai's mind.

He turns away, following Kai's gaze out towards the distant lull of the universe beyond The Endolphin, the hands in Kai's shirt trembling. "Me too, then, okay?" he whispers, his grip only tightening. "I meant it, what I said on the bridge. If you're going, you have to take me with you."

Kai freezes, choking on a high, horrified sound. "What? *No*-"

Beomgyu meets his wide-eyed gaze head on. "If you want to open this fucking airlock, we're going together," he insists.

It's a ploy, Kai thinks dizzily, stricken. It has to be. Beomgyu doesn't mean that, he's just trying to get him back inside the ship proper. But the longer he looks at him, the more it sinks in that it's *not.* Beomgyu doesn't flinch back from him when Kai moves to grip his upper arms like he means to take him up on the offer, barely even blinks when Kai reaches a hand towards the panel like a threat, his eyes fierce, *ready.* He means it.

He really, really fucking means it.

"*Why?*" Kai croaks. He'd cry if he could, his whole body quivering like it needs to, but he can't. This isn't what he wanted at all.

Beomgyu's eyebrows furrow, hot, furious tears spilling down his already raw cheeks, "What the fuck do you mean, 'why?!' Because I love you, you moron!"

Kai's legs give out. He can't control it, the tremble that was already wracking through him bearing them both down to the ground. Beomgyu doesn't let go.

"Who the fuck was it that found you!?" he spits, rage and anguish wet in every syllable. "Me! Why the hell would I go to all that trouble if I didn't love you!"

"But . . ." Kai protests, weak, hoarse. "You . . . You don't like touching me." Beomgyu's hands are trembling, white knuckled where they're twisted in his shirt. "You won't . . . Look at me."

Beomgyu shakes him, the motion a little more effective with how limp Kai's gone in his grip. "Because I don't have the fucking right!" he screams. "Why the fuck would I want to touch you, or look at you, when I'm the reason you're like this!"

Somewhere, far, far away, Kai's sure the universe stops expanding. It's supposed to happen forever, stretching on and on and on until it wraps around on itself, that distant flow of dark matter rushing back in to crash through everything that's been made and then create it all anew in one big, final and first explosion. But for just a second, he thinks it stops, every star and planet and moon holding still as the awful truth makes itself known in the confines of The Endolphin's only airlock.

Kai stares at Beomgyu, his synthetic heart in his throat as he hiccups out, "*No.*"

But Beomgyu shakes his head. "I am, though," he chokes, tears dripping down onto his trembling hands, Kai's shirt. "It's all my fault. If I h-hadn't fucked up the mission- i-if you hadn't c-come back for me . . ."

"I wanted to," Kai whispers.

Beomgyu shakes him again. "That doesn't matter! That doesn't make it any less of my fault, Kai! You're like this because of *me!*"

A year, Kai realizes for the first time, is too long.

It's more than enough time for grief to fester into guilt, and tear a person apart from the inside out. He wonders, for just a moment, how long Beomgyu has been carrying this weight, but he already knows. It's clear, right in front of him.

A year is such a long time.

Beomgyu lets go of him, his hands shifting instead to scrub at his eyes, those same, awful sobs Kai had overheard before wracking through him. "I-I don't want this," Beomgyu weeps. "I k-know I'm b-being selfish, but I-I *can't,* Kai-ya. *I can't.*" He flinches back when Kai tries to touch him, still close, but somehow just as unreachable as ever. "D- *don't,*" he hiccups. "Please d-don't."

"Beomie, I-" Kai starts.

But Beomgyu only wails, shaking his head, "*Don't!* Don't say it!"

". . . That won't make it any less true," Kai whispers, and from the way Beomgyu chokes, another awful, stricken sob heaving through him, he already knows that, too.

"I d-don't want it," Beomgyu says through his tears, one hand pushing at Kai's chest like he means to shove him away, but he's shaking too much for Kai to even pretend it's effective. "L-loving me got you *k-killed.*"

The worst part, Kai acknowledges, is that it's true.

And he'd do it again, too.

“I do love you, though,” he says before Beomgyu can stop him, ignoring Beomgyu’s wretched, wet, “*No!*” that rings in the wake of the confession. “I love you so much, Beomie. It’s . . . That’s basically all I have left.”

No body.

No memories.

Just this. His emotions. The pulse of a heart he no longer has, still overflowing with more ardent affection than he can ever express.

“I d-don’t want y-you to,” Beomgyu sobs, as if that matters, as if Kai can just turn it off and on by command. He’d laugh, if this whole thing weren’t so awful, if Beomgyu didn’t so clearly mean it with every fiber of his being. The hand that had pushed at Kai’s chest has grasped his shirt again, white knuckled when he says, “J-just come back inside, okay? I- I *can’t-*”

Kai gives the stars beyond the airlock one last, lingering glance. It’s not even the thought of having to take Beomgyu with him anymore that stops him, so much as the idea of ending things this way. How selfish, Kai thinks, to be so mired down by the prospect of this moment being the last memory he’ll ever have, Beomgyu crying over him, begging him not to love him.

If all Kai has left is his emotions, the least he can do is not waste them.

Something broke in his absence, Kai knows now, maybe irreparably. But he can’t leave things that way. Not yet. Maybe, if he’s lucky, not ever. “Okay,” he whispers.

Chapter End Notes

hmu on twitter @cat_macbeth to yell at me lmao? I mean, I'm not sorry. It's necessary. Everything has to hurt before it starts to heal, but this is the last chapter that's going to feel so hopeless. We're getting there.

Anywho, as always comments fuel me to write! I love reading all of them, the keep me energized.

Chapter 4: Four

Chapter Summary

> “Kai-ya,” Yeonjun says, hushed in the half dark. Kai hums. He’s listening. Yeonjun’s hand cards through the fibers of his hair. “Don’t . . . Don’t go anywhere, okay?”
>
> Kai tightens his arm around the other man’s middle. “I won’t."

Chapter Notes

> Sorry this one is a little late. Work beat my ass the last two weeks and I had no time to write lol.
>
> Now, onward!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> “What happened?”
>
> Against his side, Beomgyu tenses. It’s an impressive feat, really, considering he’s been tense during their entire long, long trek to med bay, trying in vain to keep as much distance between their bodies as possible even when Kai has to literally support him so he can walk. For the first time in almost an hour, he meets Kai’s eyes. It’s just a quick, wavering thing, a tiny, understanding second, but it’s enough.
>
> They’re not going to talk about this, what happened in the airlock. Not ever. And if they do, it will only be between the two of them. No one else has to know. No one else *needs* to know.
>
> Beomgyu’s gaze is somehow unsteady and steely at the same time, his resolve poignant before he looks away again and says to Taehyun, “I fell.”
>
> Taehyun’s arms fold over his chest, disbelief radiating off of every centimeter of him as he stares at the pair of them. “You *fell,*” he echoes stormily, and Kai winces.
>
> “Yeah,” Beomgyu mutters. He doesn’t offer any further explanation, or excuse, because there are none. It’s a lie, and all three of them know it. But it’s a necessary one.
>
> Guilt, unprompted and vicious, gnaws at Kai at just the thought of Taehyun ever finding out the truth.

No one needs to know. It's better that they don't. Kai doesn't even want to imagine Taehyun's agony if he ever found out, the fleeting thought of it alone jolting through him so harshly he trembles beneath it.

Beomgyu's arm around his shoulders tightens, just a bit, just for a second, even though that gap between their bodies stays chasm-wide.

Taehyun continues to glare at them, his eyes dark, searching. But whatever he's looking for he must not find, because after a moment his posture loosens and he sighs. "You're going to be on bedrest until we can stop at an outpost," he says, and Beomgyu heaves out a heavy breath through his nose. "I'm sorry, Beomgyu-ya. Honestly, I'm surprised you're standing at all."

He's right, Kai thinks with a grimace as he glances down at Beomgyu's mangled prosthetic. Back in the airlock he'd merely thought it had gotten twisted under the pressure of the door, but looking at it now, when the moment isn't so critical, less strung thin and stressed, he can see that it's . . . pretty bad. The whole mechanism of the knee is more or less crushed, the calf beneath it forcibly turned at an unnatural degree, and the foot at the base of it all pointed inwards rather than straight ahead. None of that is accounting for what Kai knows is likely laying beneath Beomgyu's cut off pant leg, either.

"S'fine," Beomgyu mutters. "It's not like I haven't spent a third of the last year of my life on fucking bedrest. I'll live."

He lifts his other arm when Taehyun moves to help him, and Kai starts to let go from his side, fully intending on making himself scarce as soon as he can. Even with everything said and done, Beomgyu's resolve hasn't changed. He might love Kai, but he doesn't want that feeling returned, still flinching away from every affectionate word or touch Kai's offered. And Kai can't begrudge him that choice, either. Beomgyu has every right to feel that way, even if doing so leaves Kai aching with the rejection.

A hand snags into the side of his t-shirt, stalling his attempt to leave. Kai stills, startled, his eyes darting to Taehyun first only to see that both of his are occupied with situating Beomgyu against his side. Which means . . .

The fingers twisting in the fabric curl tighter. Beomgyu doesn't say anything, his gaze firmly fixed on the floor, but Kai figures he doesn't really need to either. The message is pretty clear.

So Kai stays.

"I'm running out of morphine," Taehyun murmurs as he helps Beomgyu up onto one of the beds. "So I'm going to have to dose you low to take this off. I'm sorry."

Oh god.

Beomgyu's grip on Kai's shirt turns white knuckled. "Okay."

The seam where metal and skin meet looks even worse than Kai feared, somehow. It's obvious that the prosthetic got wrenched askew, and he purses his lips as Taehyun dashes across the room to wash his hands and snap on a pair of gloves before he even attempts to touch it. His examination is as gentle as it probably can be, but Beomgyu still grits his teeth against even the lightest press of fingers, biting down on his lower lip in an attempt to unsuccessfully stifle a sharp, shuddering sound.

"I don't think it's too bad," Taehyun soothes as he moves to rig up an abysmally small morphine drip to Beomgyu's wrist. "Some nasty bruising, and there's a chance you chafed some of those old scars underneath, but you'll live."

"Hooray," Beomgyu groans.

He still hasn't released his deathgrip on Kai's shirt, and makes no attempt to when Taehyun eases him into laying down while the morphine starts to take effect. Kai feels like he should offer him something more to hang on to, a hand perhaps, but he stalls on just the thought, his synthetic heart trapped somewhere in his throat. This is his fault; Beomgyu wouldn't have gotten hurt if it wasn't for him and his awful, aching spur of the moment decision. But there's nothing he can do to fix it now, either. Especially not after everything Beomgyu said.

What little Kai can offer isn't even wanted.

"Alright," Taehyun says softly. "I'm going to take it off now. Try not to tense up."

"Okay," Beomgyu returns, but it's an assurance that falls disastrously flat, as even from where he's standing on the other side of the bed Kai can see that he's pretty much locked his whole body up, already anticipating the pain that won't be entirely dulled. The hand in his shirt clenches tighter, trembling, and Kai only hesitates for another second before folding one of his own over it.

The release mechanism hisses open, and Beomgyu gasps, his eyes squeezing shut as he blindly fumbles to tangle his fingers with Kai's. Taehyun tuts under his breath, a clipped, unreadable sound, and Kai glances down Beomgyu's body to see what's garnered the reaction, only to immediately wish he hadn't.

One of Beomgyu's scars has torn beneath the prosthetic, the renewed gash oozing blood into the connecting pieces of the faux leg where the metal has bent and cut into the flesh. It's not grisley by anyone's standards, but Kai still feels ill at the sight, especially when Taehyun puffs out a low curse as he has to grab some kind of tool off the surgical table by his side and *pry* that last bit of stubborn, mangled machinery from the wound. The heel of Beomgyu's remaining foot digs into the thin medical mattress beneath him when he does it, and the hand that isn't already clutching desperately at one of Kai's own scrabbles at the front of his shirt, his back arching as his body instinctively tries to recoil from the pain. Kai takes that hand, too, gripping them both fiercely in his own while Beomgyu chokes on a hoarse whimper.

"Almost done, Beomie," Taehyun swears, setting the bloodied tools aside. "Almost done. Hold him still if you can, Kai-ya. I have to stitch this up."

Beomgyu's breath catches loudly, a wordless protest, but Taehyun doesn't heed it, already getting to work. He's good, quick, efficient, but Beomgyu still shakes through the entire ordeal, gripping Kai's hands like a lifeline until the excess bits of the seventh stitch are finally snipped free, and Taehyun starts cleaning up the damage site more thoroughly. Though that, too, isn't without its fair share of discomfort. Beomgyu's fingers kneed at the spaces between Kai's knuckles, his lower lip caught between his teeth again when Taehyun applies an antiseptic gel to the wound. Every atom of him is still wound tight, rigid even as Taehyun continuously murmurs, "You're alright, Beomie, you're alright," under his breath as he works. At this point, Kai's starting to wonder if that tiny bit of morphine did anything at all, and by the time it's over, Beomgyu's chest is heaving around sharp, ragged inhales.

Taehyun sheds his gloves, hurrying to the sink and back again before leaning over Beomgyu to card a startlingly unsteady hand through his sweat soaked hair. "I'm sorry," he whispers hoarsely. "I'm sorry. *God,* I'm so sorry."

"S'fine," Beomgyu slurs, sounding anything *but* fine.

Kai watches, stricken, as Taehyun tries his damndest to smile, the expression barely even wavering for a second before it breaks, and then he's choking on tears. "It's *not* fine," he sniffles. "I- I didn't wait for the morphine to take effect on purpose, *I'm sorry.* But if I'd waited, you wouldn't have had enough to help you sleep, and I . . ."

"S'okay," Beomgyu insists again, his eyes still squeezed shut. "Trust you, Taehyunie. S'fine. I'll live."

Once, Kai knows, that assurance would have been enough. Those kinds of affirmations were often the only sure thing they had to keep them going from day to day. Now though it rings out distinctly hollow, both in the tone it's spoken with and the echo it leaves. They're alive. They'll live. But what *for?*

"Try and relax," Taehyun whispers, still combing trembling fingers through Beomgyu's hair, long, soft strokes that make Kai's poor excuse of a heart clench in his chest. "You won't be able to feel it soon, and then you can rest, okay?"

"Kay," Beomgyu returns, cracking open an already glassy eye.

He lets go of Kai in increments, hands slipping from his like water through a sieve, a little bit at a time as he shifts one to the sheets, and the other to Taehyun's forearm where it's braced on the bed. His gaze doesn't meet Kai's as he does it, doesn't acknowledge him, and Kai's not sure if that makes it all better, or worse. He's tempted to reach out anyways, copy Taehyun in his attempts to soothe away the worst of Beomgyu's pain, but he stops himself before he can do anything more than think of it. It'll only hurt both of them more to push things. If there's any chance, any at all, that Beomgyu might one day want his affections returned, Kai knows he can't toe that line anymore than he already has. He's said everything he needs to say.

Beomgyu knows that Kai loves him, had born the brunt of that unshakable confession back in the airlock, and wept beneath it. He knows.

Now, all Kai can do is wait.

The med bay is quiet when Beomgyu finally drifts off, the air heavy as Taehyun straightens up to scrub a wrist over his eyes, his other hand still busy combing through Beomgyu's hair as if he's afraid that stopping the motion will somehow wake him. His gaze is shuttered when he lifts his head to glance at Kai. There's something Kai doesn't like the look of in his expression, simmering low as he stares at him, sharp and assessing before he whispers, "Tell me the truth, Kai-ya. Please. Just this one thing. Beomgyu-ya didn't . . . He didn't do this to himself, did he?"

Cold, clawing agony finds a niche in Kai's chest. The way Taehyun says it is heavy with the burden of knowing, and even though Kai had seen the proof with his own eyes back in the airlock, the confirmation that it wasn't simply a spur of the moment bit of recklessness leaves him hollow. "No," he says. "It was just an accident." And that much, at least, is true.

Taehyun stares at him for a heartbeat longer before he seems to accept the answer. He turns back to Beomgyu with a soft sigh puffed out through his nose, fingers returning home to card through the other man's hair again. "Don't tell him I asked you that," he pleads.

"I won't," Kai promises.

It's just one more secret to keep, another quiet weight to carry.

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Kai summons Endolphin when he departs the med bay. He stays as long as he dares, watching Taehyun brush through Beomgyu's hair in the shadowed veil of the room, only leaving once the other man untangles Beomgyu's grip from his wrist to go check on where Soobin is sleeping with his back to them. There's no reason for Kai to stick around for that, wary down to his metallic bones of the possibility of Soobin waking to company he doesn't want. He only lingers long enough to ask, so softly he almost doesn't even hear himself, "Is he okay?"

Taehyun levels him with a long, lingering look before he replies, equally quiet, "As much as he can be."

"What does that mean?" Kai asks, not missing the subtle ache in Taehyun's tone.

"It means that he's hurting in a way I can't fix."

Endolphin materializes to the tune of her name, a dance of light particles moulding themselves into her familiar shape, but she doesn't chuckle or chirr as she comes into being. Kai pauses in his steps to look at her, unnerved by the silence that she makes no move to break, merely staring back at him.

Abruptly, he remembers that he'd snapped at her the last time they'd spoken, and guilt rushes through him. "I'm sorry," he whispers. Fuck, she'd only been trying to help him, and he'd scolded her.
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She doesn’t respond, and Kai starts in alarm as she twists in the air, turning slightly away from him, her gaze trained on the floor.

“Endolphin . . .”

“Are you mad at me?” she asks.

Huh?

Even though he can’t touch her like this, Kai reaches for her regardless, a palm settling beneath her lit form as if he can hold her afloat. “Why would I be mad at you?”

Endolphin peeks at him from the corners of her eyes. “. . . I . . . Did something without being asked,” she says cryptically. Kai blinks, waiting for the inevitable elaboration, because she’s not programmed to keep secrets. Even in her most human mannerisms, Endolphin is just code and light, a reflection, as unreal as Kai himself is. “Kai-ya . . . I . . . Went and got Beomgyu-ya.”

If Kai had breath still to breathe, it would have probably stalled in his chest in the wake of that admission. “What?”

She still won’t look at him, not directly at least, her attention on the floor between them again when she obediently repeats herself. “I got Beomgyu-ya, when I saw you trying to open the airlock. I’m sorry.”

It’s only in that moment, when Endolphin can’t meet his eyes as she speaks the confession into the air, that the gravity of it all hits Kai. He clutches behind him for some bit of stability, the smooth paneling of the wall meeting his palm, his legs buckling as it finally, truly, sinks in what he’d almost done. Like many things, the weight of it is only obvious in hindsight, and while Kai can’t deny that the feeling isn’t still there, it’s no longer so all consuming that it threatens to tear him apart.

Something rushes through him, a vicious, visceral need he almost doesn’t even have a name for. “Fuck,” he whispers, hoarse and horrified. “*Yeonjunie.*”

Endolphin seems to register this as a question, tilting her head to the side as she faces him. “Yeonjun-ah is still asleep.”

Good. Like Taehyun, Kai has no intentions of ever letting Yeonjun know about what happened in the airlock. He closes his eyes, a tremble rippling through him before he chokes out, “Thank you, Endolphin.”

She cocks her head again. “For what?”

Everything. “Just . . . Thank you,” Kai insists, a touch surer.

He can’t explain what he's thanking her for, not in any way she would understand at least. Then again, Kai can’t really explain it to himself, either. Truthfully, he's not thanking her for what she prevented. It would be hypocritical of him to do that, when the ache still sits so heavily in his chest, present but untouched. Just because it's no longer thick enough to drown

in doesn’t mean it's gone. If he had to put it into words, Kai supposes that he might be thanking her for the future.

How vague, he thinks, bitter amusement curling the corners of his mouth as he continues down the hall. Can you really be grateful for something so incorporeal? Probably not. He is though, in a weird way. He's thankful for the *potential,* and whatever he may make of it, still within his grasp because Endolphin had the sense enough to realize that what Kai was doing in a single, overwhelmed moment, wasn't worth throwing that away. So, yeah, even though from where he's standing now that future looks bleak, barren, and a few tens of thousands of years too many, Kai has to thank her.

There's just enough left of him, he thinks, to change that.

When Kai gets back to the big bedroom Yeojun is in the same spot he was before, curved on his side with one arm draped across the empty sheets beside him as if there’s still someone there to hold. He snuffles in his sleep when Kai kneels on the edge of the mattress, the fingers of the outstretched hand curling before he abruptly sits up. The half light of the room illuminates his tousled hair and wild eyes, and he heaves in a heavy breath, a staggered, confused, “Kai?” uttered on the exhale.

Kai quirks what he hopes is a convincing enough smile in the sheltered dark. “Hey. Sorry, did I wake you?”

Yeonjun stares at him, blinking. At his sides his hands clench in the blanket that’s pooled around his waist. “. . . Where did you go?” He glances over across the bed, eyebrows furrowing as he takes in that Kai isn’t the only one who left. The mattress, Kai notes with quiet dismay, seems to swallow Yeonjun up at its center, the void on either side of him yawning with the spaces left behind. “ . . . BG . . .”

Oh.

Kai had wondered, back in the airlock, and before that in Beomgyu’s room, how much of the rift that had grown between Yeonjun and Beomgyu especially was mutual. He’d like to think one of them would have fought for the other, but he also knows that that’s not always how it works.

Sometimes, the gap just widens before you can stop it, the distance suddenly too far to cross.

But it must have been, mutual that is. A mutual hurt. A mutual misunderstanding.

Yeonjun stares at the empty bed around him, the very image of a man who’s just had his heart ripped out of his chest still beating.

He looks at Kai slowly, fingers white knuckled in the sheets when he says, “Did he go back to his room?” with a cadence that betrays that Beomgyu doing just that wouldn’t be anything out of the ordinary.

Ah, shit. Kai balks, cornered in a lie he can’t tell, because Yeonjun will find out eventually, one way or another. “Um . . . There was a bit of, uh, an accident, actually,” he admits,

horrified at his own wording when Yeonjun instantly tenses, his lips parting around a sharp inhale. “He’s fine!” Kai clarifies hastily. “He’s alright! Just, his leg, er, not so much? Taehyun has him in med bay,” he adds when Yeonjun starts to lift the edge of the blankets like he’s about to run off and look for him. “He’s asleep now.”

Even in the dark, he can see the way Yeonjun’s eyes narrow, his own night vision not allowing the other man the anonymity the veiled lighting would normally provide. “What happened?”

Again, Kai falters. Taehyun had accepted the blunt half truth, but it’s pretty clear Yeonjun won’t settle for something like that. So he says the only thing he can. “I can’t tell you.”

“. . . Why not?” Yeonjun asks, the tiniest hint of ice creeping into his tone now. Kai grimaces.

“I just . . . Can’t,” he defends. There’s nothing else he can offer, no elaboration he can give that won’t just break Yeonjun’s heart that much more. And even as it is, it wrecks him to say, to cut just one more rift between them. But he *can’t.*

Beomgyu was right, it would have killed Yeonjun, had Kai managed to do what he’d tried to. It absolutely would have destroyed him.

Yeonjun glares at him through the dim glow of the overhead lights, the lines of his body visibly tense for a stretched thin beat before he lifts his hands to his face and presses the heels of his palms to his eyes. “Fuck.”

For a stricken second, Kai’s sure he somehow knows anyways, but then Yeonjun follows it up with a wet, “I don’t know why I’m surprised. He never tells me anything anymore,” and that’s almost worse.

It’s not his place, Kai knows, to ask what happened. Not anymore. He lets the question die on his tongue, likely to never be answered if only because there might not be one to give. Not everyone gets a blaster pointed at their head to signal the end of a relationship. Sometimes, it just falls apart slowly, without any singular moment to mark its end.

So Kai doesn’t ask. Instead, he stays where he is, quiet, waiting for a moment that might not come, his hands in his lap as Yeonjun tries in vain to hide his tears behind his palms.

It takes a minute, or five, but eventually Yeonjun huffs out an exhale, head bowed as his arms fall to his sides again. “What time is it?” he whispers.

Kai frowns. “Does it matter?” It’s not like they’re going to be doing anything important today, not when half their crew is effectively out of commission. Besides, even when they were in good shape, Yeonjun was always the last to rise, usually only nudged out of bed via persistent prodding.

Yeonjun’s shoulders slump, “Not really.” He doesn’t look up. “Are you coming back to bed?”

His metaphorical heart in his throat, Kai asks, “Do you want me to?”

All it takes is that tiny, stilted nod, and Kai is scrambling across the bed, closing that meter distance to throw his arms around Yeonjun's neck. Yeonjun chokes on something that, in lighter circumstances, could be mistaken as a laugh, hands settling over Kai's spine as they tumble back into the sheets together. "Oof!" he complains breathlessly. "You're too heavy to bully me like this, Kai-ya."

Propping himself up on an elbow, Kai grins down at him. "That's not what you said earlier. I thought I was 'light as a feather?'"

Deadpan, Yeonjun says, "I lied."

"How dare you."

It feels like a gift, a privilege, when Yeonjun manages a smile that actually seems genuine. It's such a little thing, barely visible even with Kai's inhuman eyes, tugging up the left side of his mouth. But it's real, and that's all Kai cares about. "I'm tired," Yeonjun murmurs, tugging him a little closer with the hand ghosting over the space between Kai's shoulder blades, not pressured enough to feel. "You gonna stay the night with me, Hyuka? Keep me warm?"

Kai doesn't bother reminding him that he literally can't. There's no point. Yeonjun knows, the palm splayed over Kai's body surely making him more than aware of how cold Kai actually is. "Yeah," Kai whispers. "I can do that."

It is, in fact, the least he can do.

He lets Yeonjun tuck him up against his side, his head on the other man's chest, an ear pressed over the now foreign rhythm of his heart through his ribs. They used to sleep like this a lot, Kai recalls faintly, back when The Endolphin had first been theirs, and Kai had missed Meon Jigu so much more than he thought he would. He'd been smaller then, both of them had, younger together in more ways than one, and Kai had been easily soothed to sleep by the simplicity of fingers petting through his hair, and his own palm splayed on the gentle rise and fall of an abdomen. If he closes his eyes, he can almost pretend that nothing's changed, trick himself into thinking he really is asleep, dreaming away a night to the low lullaby of The Endolphin's engines, still sixteen and looking ahead rather than behind.

"Kai-ya," Yeonjun says, hushed in the half dark. Kai hums. He's listening. Yeonjun's hand cards through the fibers of his hair. "Don't . . . Don't go anywhere, okay?"

Kai tightens his arm around the other man's middle. "I won't," he promises, answering both questions at once, the one that's actually voiced, and the underlying prayer.

He's staying. And not just for the night.

As long as they'll have him, Kai's willing to be here.

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The Butterfly didn't come home.
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That’s where it starts, Kai knows when he sits down to try and write out everything he can remember. But even that thought is only a vague recollection. At some point, The Butterfly left, on a day that Kai can no longer recall, and then it didn’t come back.

Without the source of the memory, the emotional attachment that had come with it, Kai can think about it with a cold sense of clarity. The Butterfly never returned because that’s just what the Gigye do. They swallow up civilizations and stars and people, leaving behind sparse survivors to bow to seven empty coffins.

The Butterfly didn’t come home, and Kai snuck into a hangar so he could break into the ship that would one day become The Endolphin, fueled by grief and rage he can only draw up the hollow echo of now, because he doesn’t even remember what he’d been mourning. They must have meant something to him, the crew he can no longer name, can't draw up the faces of. They must have meant something to all of them.

There's a butterfly etched into the armrest of Soobin's captain's chair on the flight deck, and Kai traces his fingers over the outline of it on the metal for a few long minutes before he trudges back to his own seat.

With the ship being two essential people short, there's not much for him to do. Yeonjun has reluctantly plopped himself down in Beomgyu’s position at the helm, one hand fidgeting near the controls that have already been set to idle. Kai checks on him occasionally while he writes, but they don't speak. There's no need to, really, each of them lost in thoughts that aren't meant to be shared.

Kai doesn’t miss the way Yeonjun keeps pulling up the ship's diagnostics on the screen in front of him, isn't blind to how he stares at the durability of The Endolphin's cloaking program like it’s the only thing left between them and the rest of the universe. Hell, for all Kai knows, maybe it is. He hasn't thought to ask how the resistance is fairing, or whether or not Meon Jigu is even still around. Quite frankly, he’s not even sure he cares, either.

He had once, torn between bitter pride and a sense of duty when Soobin had suggested ramming The Endolphin into the Gigye base should Kai fail to return. But that had been before, back when he had something to lose, back when he could remember The Butterfly as anything other than a hazy afterthought. Even then, though, Kai feels like that commitment had been more or less ingrained into him, a chain without an anchor. It's so easy, he's sure, for those that grow up in war to let it shape the rest of their lives.

Selfishness clings to him even now though, so much stronger than the fleeting ways it used to burn in his chest while he was still human. Meon Jigu would not take him back as he is, of that much Kai is sure. Which means whatever little steadfast loyalty Kai had ever held is worthless.

The Butterfly never came back. And, quite likely, Kai won't either.

"Where are we?" he asks, breaking the silence that's been hanging in the bridge since he and Yeonjun first took up the pretense of being busy.

It takes Yeonjun a moment to answer, lifting his head from where he'd been squinting down at something on the pilot's control panel. "Uhm . . . Somewhere in Messier 81, I think?"

Kai stares. *Fuck,* that's really far out, even for them. "Are there even resistance outposts in this area?" Kai asks, dread settling in him because he's fairly certain he already knows the answer.

Yeonjun lets out an unmistakably nervous chuckle. "Ah . . . Probably not?" He stands, stretching his arms over his head while Kai is still trying to process that response. "Hey, uh, you wanna take a walk?"

". . . Huh?"

Waving a vague hand in the air between them, Yeonjun says, "I mean, it's not like we're doing anything important right now, so why not? Just a little stroll around the ship. A jaunt. A jog."

Kai snorts. "I'm not running around The Endolphin."

"Why not? Come ooooonnn," Yeonjun whines. "I'm bored."

It sounds like an excuse, Kai thinks. Sure, what they're doing right now is tedious, but it's no more mundane than a usual stint on the bridge. The only real difference is that it's just the two of them, and not . . .

Oh.

Kai looks back down at his own control panel, staring vacantly at the slow glide of information across the center screen between his thumbs. "If you want to go visit the others, that's fine," he mumbles.

He can feel Yeonjun's eyes on him, and Kai scratches the back of his neck, chasing a phantom itch of discomfort as the gaze lingers longer than it should, silent, assessing. "They don't need me bothering them," Yeonjun says eventually.

With a grimace, Kai sighs, "You don't have to say that just to placate me. It's fine. I can find something to do by myself for awhile."

Abruptly, he remembers Beomgyu calling himself a "cyborg babysitter," and winces. Fuck. They probably all agreed on some kind of system, a rotation that would allow for Kai to be under someone's supervision at all times after the incident on the bridge. He can't fault them for it, but the realization stings regardless. Kai blinks down at the console, the twist of distant radio waves dancing across the glass between his hands. "I can walk you over there, I guess," he offers. "And then wait outside." Fruitlessly, he tries to manage something close to a smile, an effort which trips disastrously short judging from the way Yeonjun's whole face falls. "I'd join you, but they *definitely* don't want to see *me,* so . . ."

He hates the way Yeonjun's looking at him, his expression unreadable, but just stricken enough that Kai knows he'd hate it even more if he knew what the other man was thinking. He has to be aware that Kai is right, the last twenty-four hours alone being proof enough of

that. At the same time, though, his gaze isn't rife with the sort of abject pity Kai fears he'll see, so he can't really complain either. If anything, Yeonjun just seems . . . Hurt, and not necessarily for himself, or for Kai, either. The hollowness in his eyes is old, aged enough to ache, and after a moment Kai has to turn his head away.

"Let's just go on a walk," Yeonjun says again, softer, and this time Kai nods.

Truthfully, there's not enough of The Endolphin to even really call it a walk. The ship's interior is made up of three large sections with the bridge in the aft and the living quarters and facilities in the stern. Technically, a fourth compartment exists in the center of the horseshoe shape that curves towardd their personal rooms, but that's just where the majority of the ship's inner workings lie, along with the tiny hangar for their single fighter, a space unsuitable for wandering through. Which means that, after a scant ten and a half minutes, Kai and Yeonjun have looped back around to the bridge again. And that was even while taking their time.

Kai had paused outside the med bay for a moment in the middle, one eyebrow cocked as he'd waited for Yeonjun to notice and take the hint, but Yeonjun had barely spared the closed door a glance, instead reaching behind him for Kai's hand and dragging him away.

The flight deck is still exactly as they left it, empty, the array of screens displaying all the usual readouts Kai expects to see while the ship is simply idling in dead space. He purses his lips, moving to pick at the material of his uniform shirt near the collar.

Yeonjun has his hands in his pockets, gaze distant as he shifts it from Kai to the bridge they left behind only ten minutes ago. There's a stiffness in his shoulders that only seems to worsen the longer they stand there, and Kai finds himself following the line of his spine, tracing the hunch of Yeonjun's shoulders, his back. Not for the first time, it sinks in that the other man isn't eating enough, the frame of him thinner than Kai remembers. In fact, he hasn't seen Yeonjun eat *at all* since the day before, and he opens his mouth to point that out, the syllables only half formed when Yeonjun turns to him and says, "Do you want to go to your room?"

Kai freezes, tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. He could fool himself, he thinks dazedly, fool both of them probably, pretend he doesn't really understand what Yeonjun's asking him. And he'd probably get away with it, too. Yeonjun would let him. It would be easy.

But it would also scrape at something in Kai that's already sore.

It's not like Yeonjun doesn't know by now, right? He must. Taehyun's notes are in The Endolphin's system, available for any of them to access. There's no way he doesn't know. But he's asking anyways, and for the life of him, Kai can't fathom why.

There won't be a point to this, an end result, not for Kai, anyways. And yet, for some reason, he can't imagine saying no.

So what if he doesn't get anything out of it, he thinks in a bitter second of weakness. It'll make Yeonjun happy, right? Maybe? That's just about all Kai's good for anymore, the only

reason he's even trying to cling to what little humanity he has left. He *wants* to make Yeonjun happy, if only for awhile, wants to be held and loved for just long enough that he forgets that he can't feel it. It won't make him whole again, but it will be *something,* and a harsh flare of desperation roars through Kai at just the thought.

He doesn't have to feel it. *He doesn't.* He just wants to *pretend* that everything's okay again, even if the only person he fools is himself.

"Yeah."

Yeonjun blinks, straightening up, and Kai instantly realizes he didn't expect him to agree. "Wha- *yeah?* Really?"

Kai nods.

Before, well, everything, they probably would have raced each other to the living quarters, tossing teasing remarks back and forth along the way. Now, though, the walk there is fraught, awkward, and Kai watches through the desolate fog in his own mind as Yeonjun activates the panel guarding the room that used to be his own.

It's just as much of a mess as Kai had seen when he'd viewed it through the security feed, cluttered with so many of Yeonjun's things that it really only seems like Kai's room upon first glance, a trick of nostalgia blinded by reality. There are various blasters and their parts scattered on the shelves, clothes left in disarray on the floor, none of them Kai's. Even his stuffed animal collection isn't untouched, the tangled pile of them behind the retaining net in the corner looking significantly smaller than Kai remembers.

Yeonjun follows his gaze, a faint flush coloring his cheeks. "Ah, sorry about the mess. And if you're looking for your plushies, I think some of the others stole a few, uh, awhile ago."

A year ago, he means. Kai shrugs. "It's not like they're much good to me anymore," he mutters. "I liked them because they were soft, and they helped me sleep. And now . . ."

It doesn't matter if they're soft if he can't feel them. And Kai doesn't need help sleeping when he can't even sleep anymore in the first place.

"You had Molangie on the bridge last night," Yeonjun reminds quietly, and Kai looks away, mortified at being called out on his own bullshit. He didn't think anyone had noticed.

He doesn't have a good excuse, either, not one that makes sense at least. How can he explain that some things were just comfortable, even when they were ultimately meaningless?

Kai swallows, another thing that's reflex, a faux show of normalcy he can't help. Like Molangie. "I just . . ." He starts. "I think I'd go crazy," he whispers, "if I didn't pretend . . ."

Everything in his body coils tight when Yeonjun reaches up to settle his palms on either side of Kai's face. He's going to ask, Kai thinks, dread in every synthetic atom of him. He's going to ask if this, too, is something he just needs to pretend is alright. But to his surprise, Yeonjun doesn't. Instead, he simply looks at him, long and longing, every bit of Kai's own grief

reflected in his eyes. It won't feel like anything, Kai knows, and still, he chokes out a wavering plea. "Kiss me?"

Yeonjun surges into him.

It's a messy thing, the way their mouths collide, but that almost makes it better, makes it *real.* Yeonjun is both everywhere and nowhere all at once, hands gliding down Kai's spine not heavy enough, teeth digging into Kai's lower lip with just the right amount of pressure to register. He crowds Kai back against the closed door, and Kai lets him, wanting with a fierce flare of desperation to be caged in even before Yeonjun does it, his back hitting the reinforced metal and sending a shiver of anticipation through him. Yeonjun parts just long enough to take a breath, and Kai barely even lets him have that, chasing after him, fingers grasping at the other man's shirt to tug him closer. "Be rough," he gasps over the corner of Yeonjun's mouth. And then, because he knows the request is already catching Yeonjun off guard, "*Please.*"

Again, Yeonjun breaks away, this time to nuzzle over the hinge of Kai's jaw, teeth grazing synthetic skin. He's tense, Kai notes with dismay, the palm he has resting on Yeonjun's chest tracing out the rapid thunder of his heart beneath staggered breaths. But if he's having second thoughts, Yeonjun doesn't show it. He only pauses for a moment, seemingly gathering his resolve, because in the next instant, Kai's grinning as insistent hands grasp around the backs of his thighs. It's a familiar motion, but he still hesitates to comply. "I'm heavy," he reminds, hoping the reprimand comes off more teasing than torn. It must, because Yeonjun just huffs out a discontented note against his throat.

"Brat. It's like two meters to the bed, tops. You're not that heavy."

Debatable. Kai hums in agreement regardless though, wrapping his arms around Yeonjun's shoulders and obligingly leaning his weight into it so Yeonjun can lift him up. He smirks when the other man staggers. "If you break me, you gotta buy me," he purrs.

Something almost like warmth flickers in his chest when Yeonjun snorts out, "Thought you wanted me to be rough with you, baby."

Kai doesn't make a sound when Yeonjun tips them over onto the mattress, too busy trying to bury his face against his partner's skin to bother. He feels chilled even though that sort of thing doesn't really register in his systems, memory clinging to his cobwebbed mind, struck through with recollection of how heated he should feel right now, but isn't. "M'not too cold am I?" he asks, the question ringing in the air far more hitched than he'd like.

The hands rucking up his shirt pause, and Kai squeezes his eyes shut, dreading the confirmation.

". . . No," Yeonjun breathes after a moment, and Kai uncoils immediately, sagging back into the sheets as relief washes through him. "No, sweetheart. You're . . . You're perfect."

Not for the first time, Kai's struck by the overwhelming need to cry, a strangled sound escaping him that he shivers with as his body realizes there's no release for that emotion. He

tucks his face further into the curve of Yeonjun's shoulder, clinging to him that much tighter when the hands on his ribs falter. "Don't stop," Kai chokes. "*Don't stop.*"

He wants this. He does. Maybe more than he's ever wanted anything. He wants to pretend, just for a little while, that he's human, even if the act will ultimately just be a mimicry of what it once was.

Yeonjun shifts one hand to his hair, fingers carding through the caramel fibers. "I'm not going anywhere, Kai-ya," he swears.

They shed their clothes like they have nowhere else to be, slowly, careful touches mapping out familiar planes that aren't as familiar as they once were. There's a new scar on Yeonjun's shoulder, Kai notes, its source only sinking in once he's already following the path of it with his fingers, and he stills.

"Not your fault," Yeonjun soothes, catching the wandering hand and pressing a kiss to Kai's palm. His own attention is on Kai's chest, curious eyes finding old places that no longer bear the marks they used to, and Kai watches his eyebrows furrow as they dance lower. A thumb brushes near his navel, and Kai is only aware of it because he tilts his head to look. "You used to have two pretty moles, right here," he whispers. Kai doesn't know what to say to that.

He feels like he should apologize, maybe, even though that doesn't make any sense. It's not like it's his fault, every alteration was against his will. If he could, Kai would take back every mole and scar and malformity the Gigye ripped from him, just to wipe that awful look from Yeonjun's face. For some reason, he apologizes anyways. "Sorry."

Of course that has the opposite effect of what he wants, and Kai fumbles to grip Yeonjun's waist where he's straddling his thighs as he looks at him, stricken. Abruptly, he's terrified that he's fucked up, a notion that must show on his face because Yeonjun's aghast expression only deepens, his lips parting around a low, wounded inhale. A hand threads into his hair again, tugging his head up, and Kai goes without protest as Yeonjun leans over him to kiss him, fierce enough to bruise if Kai were still capable of bruising. "Come here," Yeonjun commands, as if Kai isn't already totally tangled up in him, as if he isn't clawing at his back like letting go will mean letting go of himself, too. "*Come here.*"

It takes awhile to get any further, Yeonjun moulding against him rather than giving either of them the space they need to kick out of their pants. He kisses Kai like he's trying to drown, gasping for breath whenever he does have to come up for air only to dive right back in again. Each time he rolls down against him, takes Kai's face between his hands, his kisses are increasingly more desperate. His hips stutter, and Kai releases the deathgrip he has on Yeonjun's shoulder blades to skim further south, keep him still for a second as he tilts their faces apart and whispers, "Hey, I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

The words are almost like a mantra now, the way they keep reassuring each other with them, back and forth both in the shadows of the night before and now. And unfortunately, Kai knows it's one they'll have to keep repeating, too. Afterall, they were apart for a *year,* long enough for missing someone to turn into grieving for them, the ache of which will linger, Kai fears, for longer than they'll ever be together.

Their noses brush together, heavy breaths ghosting over Kai's mouth, his chin, as Yeonjun stares down at him. They're so close, chest to chest, Yeonjun's knees squeezing around his middle, hands clenched in Kai's hair, but somehow it still doesn't seem close enough. He wants more, but doesn't know how to ask for it in a way that won't sound forced, or desperate. And he's not sure Yeonjun will, either.

There's no way he hasn't noticed it by now, Kai thinks with a flash of guilt, bitter disgust with himself thick in his throat when he tries to speak, and fails. No, Yeonjun's definitely noticed, how could he not? He's bearing enough weight down onto him that Kai can just make out how hard he is, the line of him pressed heavy and no doubt hot against the jut of his hip. Which means Yeonjun knows.

Of course he can't reciprocate. He can't feel anything. He doesn't have any nerves. He doesn't have any blood. The only thing faker than his body right now is the act they're engaging in. He can't express that he's enjoying this with anything other than words, and even those won't come to him, stuck behind a thick wall of self loathing and selfishness.

He wonders if Yeonjun has realized what he's doing, or if he's willfully ignorant of the fact that Kai's blatantly using him.

Yeonjun's hands leave his hair, thumbs pressing under Kai's chin, urging them together again for another kiss. "Tell me what you want, Hueningie," he murmurs, and Kai *melts.*

Just this once is okay, right? Kai can take just this once, be greedy just this one time? Yeonjun is *asking,* he wouldn't do that if he weren't willing to give it. Right?

He curls his arms around Yeonjun's shoulders again, tucking his face against the other man's throat until he registers the heady thrum of a pulse. "You should fuck me, hyung."

Part of him expects Yeonjun to tense up again, reject him, even though this had been his idea first, so he's pleasantly surprised when the other man just laughs, a low, unreadable sound. "Pushy," he hums, and the note of the affectionate phrase is so familiar it leaves an aching hole in Kai's very center. His hands travel from Kai's hair to his back, then lower still, thumbs hooking into the waistband of his pants as he shimmies further down Kai's body to settle between his legs and tug them off, his underwear close behind. He barely spares Kai's soft cock a glance, instead gripping his freshly bared thighs, hard enough that Kai can almost, *almost* convince himself that he really feels it. "How should we do it, baby? Like this? Or do you want to ride."

Normally, Kai would jump at the chance to do the latter, the offer a rare privilege between them simply because that's not how they usually fall into bed together. But there's no point in it now, is there. And Kai's desperate for something else entirely.

Yeonjun can give that to him far better than any of the others can. He's the only one Kai submits to like this, the only one Kai has *ever* spread his legs for, not for lack of want so much as the fact that that's simply how the two of them *work.* Yeonjun makes him feel treasured, desired in an entirely different way, and that's what Kai's after now.

It doesn't matter that he can't get hard, or that it won't be pleasurable. More than anything, what Kai needs right now is simply to be *wanted;* for Yeonjun to want him the way he used to, for Yeonjun to fuck him like Kai is still something to be adored and held close and kept safe. He can let go with Yeonjun, pretend like nothing's changed despite the fact that *everything* has, even for just a moment. And Yeonjun won't ask for anything he can't give.

"Like this," Kai returns, hoarse. "Just like this. *Please.*"

There are jokes to be made here, Kai thinks as he stares up at the ceiling while Yeonjun sits up to shed his pants and fumble in the bedside drawer, obvious ones that Kai almost cracks regardless, but doesn't. Yeonjun figures out a lot of the grim hilarity on his own anyways, a stilted, odd sort of chuckle bubbling from him when he nudges Kai's knees further apart and mutters, "Probably don't need to do much prep here, huh." Not a question, but a comment.

Kai resists the urge to roll over onto his side and bury his face in the pillows, embarrassed and eroded from the inside out as he mumbles, "No." Against his better judgement, he adds, "It's not like you can hurt me."

He winces at Yeonjun's answering silence, the one hand still clasped around his thigh tightening. Kai rolls onto his side anyways, horrified with himself. *Fuck.*

The mattress dips around his body, his thigh released as Yeonjun braces both palms to the sheets beside his hips, voice fierce as he says, "*Kai-ya.*"

Kai grimaces, curling further into himself rather than meet his gaze, terrified of what he'll see in his partner's eyes. Disgust? Pity? Grief? He doesn't need any of those.

Yeonjun nudges a hand to his cheek, the press of it enough for Kai to almost feel, and reluctantly Kai glances his way. "Kai," he murmurs, ". . . You . . . You want this, right?"

"Yeah," Kai whispers. He tenses as Yeonjun's eyes flicker over his face, searching for something he doesn't seem to find, his expression just as shuttered as Kai's sure his own is right now.

For a moment, he thinks it's over, that Yeonjun's figured him out and decided he wants no part in Kai's greedy desires. But then he leans in again, caging Kai down against the mattress with his arms, kissing him as though he needs the press of their bodies together to survive. Kai doesn't miss the way he shivers, how it means that that brief parting had been enough time for his skin to cool, but he can't bring himself to care. He twists under Yeonjun's hands, squirming to get closer, burrow into him as Yeonjun responds by tugging him closer, and then closer still. "Can I leave a mark?" Kai gasps, already scraping his teeth over Yeonjun's earlobe, the line of his jaw. Yeonjun chokes on a noise that could almost be a laugh, during better and brighter days. "Please? I want to make you feel good."

He doesn't like the low, wounded noise he receives for that admission. "You *are,* baby."

Kai huffs out a protest. "Then I want to make you feel even better," he grouses. Yeonjun nods, a kiss of his own pressed to Kai's collar bone, and that's all the permission Kai needs. He's careful about it, probably to an unnecessary degree, wary of breaking skin, or sucking

too hard. There's no way to tell when he's crossed the threshold between too little and too much, no copper tint to warn him, so he goes off of memory and sound alone. After a moment, Yeonjun hisses in a breath through his teeth, and Kai pulls back just enough to press his tongue to the blooming bruise.

Yeonjun snickers near his ear. "Tickles," he says when Kai does it again. "Your mouth isn't wet, you know," he reminds.

Ah. Kai frowns, nuzzling at the mark with a frustrated groan. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I'll get used to it." Yeonjun noses at his cheek, and Kai leans his way, thrilled when he doesn't hesitate to kiss him regardless. There's an implication there that he can't bear to think about, let alone place any hopes in. But it buzzes through him anyways, the idea that this won't be just a once-off to satiate their curiosity leaving him trembling. Kai makes an overwhelmed, distinctly wanting noise in the back of his throat, and Yeonjun answers it by pressing even closer, charting out a path down Kai's neck towards the dip above his sternum. He has a hand on the back of Kai's thigh again, nudging his leg up. He's still practically crowding Kai down against the mattress, the tangle of their bodies so ensnared that Kai almost loses focus until he jolts as something brushes against his insides with just enough insistence that he actually registers it.

It doesn't feel like anything, really, just an odd, distant pressure that makes whatever sensors Kai's made of ping until he takes note of it. Kai grunts as a third finger slips into him, and he leans back into the sheets, taking enough space so that he can glance down between their bodies. His nose wrinkles. "Weird," he whispers.

"Good weird, or bad weird?" Yeonjun asks.

Kai looks up at him, their foreheads bumping together when he does. His hair's mussed, he notes with a pang, his ears red, things Kai knows he's just done to him, but can't remember the sensation of because it simply wasn't there. He musters up a smile he doesn't feel, and forgets to answer the question. "I like it," he murmurs instead, because he does. It doesn't feel either good or bad. "I like *you,*" he adds, and he means that, too.

It's not enough. Yeonjun blinks down at him, that awful, distant look in his eyes again, and Kai is desperate to chase it away. He takes his face between his hands, dragging him in for yet another kiss he can only taste the pressure of. "Love you," he insists, anguished as he realizes neither of them have said it yet. "I just want to be close to you, hyung. Want you to feel good."

Yeonjun chokes, "*Fuck,* baby, I love you too. You know that. You don't have to-"

Maybe. Kai lets him go just far enough to stare up at him, taking in the stricken look on the other man's face but gripping him by the biceps so he can't go very far. "Show me," he says, and hates himself for it.

He watches Yeonjun hitch in another harsh breath, the rise and fall of his chest where they're still pressed together heavy enough to rattle through him, too, an echo of all they used to be. If he refuses, Kai will let him go. He will. It'll probably break him to do so, but he'll do it.

He's greedy, and selfish, but he's not an *asshole.* The second Yeonjun tells him no, Kai will stop, and he won't ask for anything else ever again.

Yeonjun cups his hands around his face, and Kai only realizes he's trembling as he does it, thumbs soothing over his cheeks. "Okay."

Kai blinks. "Okay?"

"Yeah," Yeonjun murmurs.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Kai knows that they need to talk about this more. There's a tension in the air he doesn't like, but he can't break it, too focused on everything else to pay it any more attention than he already has. Hell, they probably should have talked more before they even started. If they were better people, they would have. Except they're not, are they. They're just themselves, and Kai is strung thin with needy, desperate desire, every bit of which he can see reflected right back at him when Yeonjun surges down to kiss him again.

Really, they're probably both doing the same thing, Kai thinks as he threads his fingers into Yeonjun's hair, urges him to take whatever he wants, and he wonders how long they can keep chasing after memories before they end up hurting each other.

"Inside," Kai whispers, biting another mark beside the one he's already left. He fumbles blindly through the sheets for the lube, shoving it against Yeonjun's chest once he has it in hand. "Please, hyung, *please.* I want . . ."

"Pushy," Yeonjun scolds, and again it's too familiar, carving at something in Kai that's too raw to bear it, and he whimpers as it sinks into him. "My pushy, pushy boy," Yeonjun murmurs. "You sure you wouldn't rather ride?"

Kai shakes his head when Yeonjun takes the lube from him. "You can't hold me if I'm on top," he says, the syllables hanging with unsteady honesty in the air.

"Oh, *sweetheart* . . ."

It doesn't matter that he barely feels anything when Yeonjun guides himself inside him. It doesn't matter that Kai only registers the faint sensation of pressure, and not the heat, or real weight, or pleasure of being filled. It doesn't matter that it's not enough. He buries his face against Yeonjun's shoulder, shivering as a hand cards through his hair, tugs until he *does* feel that, a whine escaping him as he remembers his earlier request for Yeonjun to be rough if only so Kai can pretend. There's no pain that comes with the action, it merely jerks Kai's head back a bit, baring his throat so Yeonjun can press a kiss to it, but he doesn't care. He likes it anyways, likes the phantom illusion it gives him.

And then Yeonjun says something that shocks him. "Fuck, baby, you're warm."

Kai's tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth for a second, too startled to find the words to respond. Yeonjun's hips jerk, and he hisses on an inhale, the line of his back bowing over Kai further as he tries his damndest not to move. "I . . . I am?" Kai finally hitches out.

He's mesmerized by the way Yeonjun's eyes are squeezed shut, how he tugs his lower lip up between his teeth as he pulls Kai's hips closer to him. "*Fuck,*" he repeats, strained. "Like, really warm. *Ah,* Hyuka, I'm not gonna last at all."

Well, it's not like he needs to. Kai stares, eyes tracing over every inch of the other man as he pants out one, two, three heavy breaths, still frozen in place. "It feels good?"

Yeonjun nods.

Oh.

He loops his arms around Yeonjun's shoulders again, ignoring the way his partner chokes around an exhale, hands scrambling to slip between Kai's back and the sheets and press them closer together. "Careful, baby," he chuffs, chin tucked into the crook of Kai's neck, but Kai ignores that too. He rolls his hips, desperate now to keep them in the suspended moment. This is what he wanted, to be held and adored, to make Yeonjun *feel good.*

A sigh slips from his lips when Yeonjun finally snaps into him in return, and Kai wraps his legs around him better, locking his ankles against the small of the other man's back. This used to be his favorite part, when they'd be so wrapped up in each other they moved like one person, when Yeonjun would press these fervent kisses to his cheek, his neck, while he fucked him. His hands scratch down Kai's back, fingers clawed as though he means to recarve Kai's missing scars himself, just rough enough for Kai to feel the weight of his touch. He's heavy all around him, too, heavy *inside* him, itching at the void in the center of Kai's chest whenever their bodies roll together.

It doesn't feel good. It doesn't feel bad. It's not *anything.* But Kai relishes in it anyways, soaking up every gasp and groan, carding his hands through Yeonjun's hair when he has to part for air, panting breaths Kai doesn't need over his lips before kissing him again. He likes the glazed look in Yeonjun's eyes, the quirk of a smile that ghosts over his face whenever their gazes lock, as though he wants to laugh but can't. He likes the sheen of sweat on his forehead, the flush that spreads down to his chest, and the way their noses brush together when he murmurs, "Don't look at me like that," his tone tinged with amusement.

"Like what?"

Yeonjun kisses him, fierce and fast, a moan muffled into Kai's mouth. "Like you want to eat me up."

A smirk spreads over Kai's face, and he squeezes his thighs around Yeonjun's waist. "I might."

He grins as Yeonjun thunks his head down into the crook of his neck, his thrusts faltering, hands shifting to Kai's waist again to bring them flush together. "*Hah,* fuck, s'been too long." An exhale hisses out between his teeth, a sound Kai knows too well, has seared into the very core of him.

Kai traces nonsense shapes down Yeonjun's spine, relearning old intimacies with his new limitations. Some of it is the same; familiar coilings of muscle, possessive fingers digging

into a body that doesn't remember the touch of them, fervent affections murmured near his ear. Kai knows these things in the same way he used to know himself, carnal comforts marked across and in him like birthmarks and constellation patterns he no longer bears on his skin. He's always loved the way Yeonjun will bundle them closer together when he starts to tip over the precipice, how he gathers Kai in his arms until they're tangled up and whole, dizzy drunk on each other and panting. And he loves it now, too.

Yeonjun noses at the hinge of his jaw, the jut of his chin, teeth scraping over places that should be sensitive, but aren't, like he's trying to leave proof of himself on a star, the efforts burned away. His thrusts stutter, a coarse groan echoing in the room as it travels from his lungs to the corner of Kai's mouth. "M'gonna come," he says, his lower lip caught in his teeth, their foreheads bumping together the next time he rolls his hips. "Fu- *hah*- uck, Hueningie, baby, I- *mm!*"

He pulls out abruptly, his flushed cock slapping loudly against his abdomen as he does, and Kai watches with half-lidded eyes as Yeonjun wraps his fingers around the base, just once, and starts to spill over his stomach. Ropes of cum land along Kai's hip, paint thickly across his navel, and drip down obscenely over his skin, a messy finish to a messy start. Yeonjun slumps against his chest once he's spent, moving back to clutching Kai's hip with the same palm. "Kai-ya," he hums, the note of it singing with ardor as he cards the fingers of his other hand through Kai's hair. Kai can feel the thunder of his heartbeat where they're pressed together, chest to chest, distracting enough that he doesn't realize Yeonjun's muscle memory has kicked in until it's too late.

The hand on his hip shifts reflexively over, and they both go rigid as Yeonjun curls his fingers around Kai's soft cock.

Something awful and hollow explodes in the middle of Kai's consciousness, swallowing him whole as he takes in the way Yeonjun's expression changes from flushed, post-orgasmic bliss, to pale and stricken before he can even get a full inhale into his lungs as he does it. He stares down at Kai, lips parting around a hoarse, aching noise, and Kai doesn't reach for him fast enough to stifle it with physical reassurance.

Yeonjun reers back, almost toppling over the other way and onto his ass. The only reason he stays upright at all is because Kai still has his legs around his waist, trapping him. He heaves in another breath, dry, his eyes wild, and his exhale escapes him distinctly wet. "*Kai . . .*"

Kai sits up, untangling their bodies only just long enough to do so before he binds them together again, arms thrown over Yeonjun's shoulders, face tucked into the crook of his neck. "It's okay," he says, the words tumbling out of him too fast. "It's alright, I wanted-"

"I-" Yeonjun hiccups, chokes, the panic and disgust thick in even that single syllable. Kai presses closer, holds him tighter, unwilling to let him say it.

"You didn't," he assures fiercely. "*You didn't,* Yeonjunie. If . . ." He stalls, the admission faltering when it tries to form, and a shudder ripples through him. "If anyone did something wrong here, it was . . . It was definitely me." He should have stopped, Kai realizes with thick, awful dismay. The thought had crossed his mind during the act, more than once, marred with guilt over what he was doing. But he hadn't. Instead, he'd been selfish, so absorbed in his

cruel need to feel even the barest shred of humanity that he hadn't thought about the inevitable aftermath enough. It's not really a surprise that Yeonjun would react this way, reality digging harsh claws into him too fierce and fast to stave it off.

Yeonjun sobs, hands clenching against Kai's shoulder blades, desperate now in a different way that makes Kai *ache.* "Wh-why would you let me *do that* to you?" he hitches out, the words trembling, agonized. Kai winces, trying to sit back so he can move to reassure Yeonjun that he didn't do anything Kai didn't want, but he can't, the other man's grip on him curling tighter when he tries. "I- I *used you*-"

"No," Kai denies, soft, angry. "No, Yeonjunie, you-"

"-like a *toy.*"

Kai pushes a palm to his chest, forcing a breath of space between them, anguished when his diagnostic systems pick up the tempo of Yeonjun's rabbit-rapid heart beneath the touch. "*No,*" he repeats, "you didn't. You didn't because that's *exactly* what I wanted you to do, Yeonjun-ah."

The way Yeonjun's eyes widen would kill him if Kai weren't already dead to begin with. "What?"

"I wanted you to use me," Kai admits, his voice breaking around the confession. "I wanted to . . . To pretend that everything was normal again. I thought that, maybe, if I could at least still get you off it didn't matter if I got anything out of it, and I . . . I could just . . . Be *me,* for a moment. I wanted-" Kai can't breathe, not at all, not ever again, but he tries anyways, choking on the way the air stalls inside him with no purpose, nowhere to go, a ghost of existence just like the rest of him. "I wanted to forget that I was . . . That I was *like this,*" he whispers, "and I knew you'd hate it. *I knew that.* And I still . . ." If he could cry, Kai's sure he would have started to already, and his vision flickers as if he is, the image of Yeonjun sitting in front of him, pale and horrified, fading in and out. "*I* used *you,*" Kai croaks.

And maybe, in the end, that'll be what truly sets him apart from the person he once was. He doesn't think Kai Kamal Huening would have ever done something like this. But the remains of him, those spit back out pieces? Well, they've already done it. Kai's unsteady gaze darts away, unable to meet Yeonjun's eyes any longer, and instead lands on his own stomach, the proof of what he's done, cum staining inhuman silicone skin, and he fumbles to press the heels of his palms against his face. "Fuck," he heaves out, "*fuck,* Yeonjunie, I'm so fucking *sorry.*"

He'll be around for far more than a handful of millenia, Kai knows, chained to a faux excuse of being alive, trapped forever at twenty-two, and still this moment will be burned into his mind until whatever cosmic battery powering him finally fails. Even if he doesn't want it to, Kai suspects it'll linger far longer than any other memory of Yeonjun, seared to be an eternal part of him, evidence of just how cruel he can be, as heartless as he's been wrought.

Yeonjun has always loved fiercely, deeply, and Kai *took advantage of that.*

A hand brushes against his, careful fingers trying to pry his palms from his eyes, and Kai flinches. “Kai . . .”

Kai shakes his head, hiccupping on an overwrought sound he can’t control. “I used you,” he repeats, just in case the truth hasn’t sunken in yet. Why else would Yeonjun still be trying to touch him? “I- I used your love for Kai to get what I wanted, and I-”

He stalls when he hears Yeonjun suck in a broken little breath, “Baby, don’t-”

“-and I shouldn’t have, and I’m *sorry.*”

Another hand, this time on the other side, the grip more insistent as the pair of them pry Kai’s palms away from his face, thumbs squeezing over a now useless lifeline at their center. “*Kai,*” Yeonjun repeats, “baby, don’t . . . You’re gonna ruin me, talking about yourself like that, like you’re not . . .”

There’s something feral in Kai, untamed, hurt, *desperate,* trapped with nowhere to go as it thrashes around inside him. It takes everything he has not to give in to it, to let that rush of bitter anguish take over and either pull him under, or lash out. So it escapes him in words, instead. “I know,” he chokes, “that you think I am. That you want to believe that. But I’m *not.* I’m not Kai.”

Maybe he was, once. But he’s not anymore. There’s not enough left to be Kai, who had been all smiles and laughter, bright in so many ways that the cybernetic remains of him can never hope to imitate. If anything, he came back to The Endolphin as a shadow, unstitched from the bottom of the real Kai’s feet and decayingly thin after being tucked away in a drawer for too long. Except, there isn’t a body to sew him to, no way for him to go back to being whole.

Kai trips over the second star to the right and falls short, crashing back down to the reality that pretending is all he’ll ever have, and that’s not even worth having. Not like this. Not when he has to hurt the people he loves to get it.

The hands squeezing around his shake, their grip white knuckled when Yeonjun whispers, “Kai-ya, I love you *so much.*”

Everything in Kai locks up, grinding to a halt and hitching jaggedly. “No-”

“I do,” Yeonjun insists, like it’s a *vow.*

“I’m not Kai,” Kai hiccups, thick, vicious, as if saying it enough will drill it into the other man.

He doesn’t like the grim, knowing way Yeonjun’s lips quirk, a thin show of a smile that doesn’t even come close to reaching his eyes. “That’s okay,” he murmurs. “I don’t . . . I don’t think I’m Yeonjun anymore, either. I mean,” he nods to the room around them, the shelf littered with blaster parts, the bed that used to be Kai’s own, proof of a life half lived in vacant spaces left behind. “A lot changes in a year, doesn’t it, sweetheart.”

He used to laugh more, Kai realizes, the same sort of stricken thought he's sure Soobin must have had about him, too, on the bridge the night before. And he's barely smiled in the week or so Kai's been back. His fingers curl around Yeonjun's too-thin wrists, vision faltering again as he rakes his eyes over sallow cheeks, dark half-moon bags, ribs he can count.

"Is it so bad?" Yeonjun whispers, every note of it hushed and aching. "Being different people? Doesn't that just mean we can fall in love with each other all over again?"

Kai stares at him, faux senses all zeroing in on where Yeonjun is still gripping his hands like a lifeline, a weight at the bottom of the sea, making sure he can't be swept away. "I hurt you," Kai hitches out.

Yeonjun's tiny, strained smile, twitches. "Yeah," he agrees. "But I hurt you, too, by doing this." He cuts Kai off before he can protest, squeezing his hands so tightly Kai's sure his joints would creak if they were still bone and sinew. "We've both been pretty awful people tonight, Kai-ya. But I guess that evens the playing field a bit, doesn't it? We can trade apologies. I'm sorry, too."

"You don't have anything to be sorry for," Kai says weakly.

"I could say the same to you," Yeonjun sighs.

They'll never move on, Kai thinks darkly, the miasma of it already too heavy in the air for him to bear, not if they keep passing their regrets back and forth like this forever. They're both at fault, at least in their own minds, and they have to accept that. So instead of blurting out another platitude that won't mean anything, Kai whispers, soft and just a little bit scared, "I love you too, you know."

He wonders if the differences are just as visible to Yeonjun as they are to him, if the other man finds those same faults worn down by a year apart as easily as Kai does. Where Kai picks out a thin frame, Yeonjun sees missing moles, each of them stumbling over proof of time they can't get back, old selves they no longer live up to. But those are just things, outside shells held up over the mess inside. Kai doesn't consider those haunted eyes to be Yeonjun any more than he does the visible knobs of his spine, or the tired stretch of his trying smile. They are not traits that make him. Yet Kai loves them anyways.

They are, afterall, marks that he's still alive.

"I don't remember our first kiss," Kai says softly, heartbroken long before the sound of the confession even finishes leaving his mouth.

For some reason, that makes Yeonjun smirk, the expression more real than almost anything he's worn in days. "Good," he snorts. "I hated it anyways." Kai thinks he'd probably be offended if he had any context to be, but he's not. A smile of his own wavers on his lips, strained but no less real. "We can have a new first kiss," Yeonjun goes on, dropping Kai's hands to clutch at his face instead, squeezing his cheeks until Kai huffs on something that's almost, *almost* a laugh, but not quite, the sound of it too weathered to ring out right. "Come here."

He doesn't point out that they've already technically done this, an hour behind them where they'd been absorbed in nothing but. Kai leans in without hesitation, overwhelmed when Yeonjun presses their lips together with a sweetness he nearly tastes despite everything. There's still no feeling to it, the weight of the kiss barely a ghost of sensation, but Kai clings to it anyways, nudging their noses together for a second, a third, chasing those little traces like he needs them to move forward. And maybe he does.

"Careful, baby," Yeonjun hums between a fourth and fifth, palms fitting low on Kai's jaw, his pinky fingers trailing over his throat. His touch shakes, and Kai reaches to draw it away, tangle their hands together instead, understanding without the verbal confirmation what Yeonjun is scared of happening.

They've already taken enough from each other tonight, torn open wounds in themselves that will need more time and affection than a simple kiss can heal. Still, though, Kai can't help the greedy, possessive flare that sparks in him, dulled down by the hurt they've caused but no less ardent. "Can you hold me?" he asks, hating how the request trembles in the air. "I just- *I need*-"

Yeonjun doesn't hesitate, bundling Kai close before he's even finished asking. And much like he had with sex, Kai grasps onto what few things he can, scrambling for anything that can keep him tethered down to where he desperately wants to be. It doesn't matter that he can't feel the warmth of it. It doesn't matter that the weight of the embrace is only a vague sensation, not enough to be comfortable if only because Kai isn't even sure what comfort means anymore. He sags in Yeonjun's hold, quivering with every need he can only fulfill in shallow beats just like this.

So close and yet so far.

Winding his arms under Yeonjun's, Kai finds the line of his back, too prominent, and traces the shape of an old scar he can't recall the origin of. "Do you think we'll ever go back to the way we used to be?" he whispers, unable to help himself.

The room is quiet, stained with thoughts neither of them utter for a long, long time before Yeonjun finally says, faintly hopeful, "I don't know. Maybe. I'd . . . I'd like to hear you to laugh again."

Kai tucks his face against the other man's shoulder, muffling a smile deep enough into Yeonjun's skin so that he can feel it without untangling them. "Yeah. Well, I'd like for you to bulk up enough that you can Gyro Drop me," he mutters.

At that, Yeonjun does laugh, a clipped little thing. "Seriously? You're way too tall for that now, Hueningie baby. I haven't . . ." He draws off, and Kai blinks as he tenses against him and sucks in a sharp, shallow breath. "Kai . . ." he chokes. "Kai-ya . . . I haven't Gyro Dropped you since you were sixteen."

"Yeah, I know-"

"No." Yeonjun cuts him off, sitting up fully and ignoring Kai's protests as he makes him follow suit so they can look each other in the eye. "Hueningie, listen to me. I haven't Gyro

Dropped you since you were sixteen, *before* the ceremony for The Butterfly. We- we were still academy trainees on Meon Jigu then. We- we hadn't even kissed yet. *Kai.*"

Kai stares at him as the meaning sinks in, the implication, and he tears through his mind for confirmation. But there it is, a single shining star in the midst of an empty nothingness, the memory of Yeonjun swinging him around upside-down when the two of them had still been young both inside and out, laughing while Kai screeched and giggled until he was red in the face.

"*Yeonjun-ah,*" Kai croaks weakly, stunned. He doesn't know what to do with it, this sudden little thing he's been given back, he doesn't know how it reappeared, either. The only thing he cares about is that he has it now, a fierce, fiery hope roaring to life in him.

Yeonjun laughs, the sound real as it peels through the shadows of Kai's old bedroom, and then he's leaning in, peppering Kai's face with kisses, heedless of Kai's startled sputtering. "Kai," he breathes, pride and affection laced so deeply into his name that Kai shakes beneath the love of it. "*Kai.*"

For the first time, Kai finds the shape of himself fits, just for a second, when it's said like that, drawn around the revelation that they haven't lost everything yet.

Chapter End Notes

As always, please please leave a comment if you've enjoyed the chapter! They really make my day, and fuel me to keep writing the fic! Hit me up on twitter @cat_macbeth too if you want to see WIP excerpts from upcoming chapters and other fics as well! Thanks so much as always for reading!

Chapter 5: Five

Chapter Summary

> "Well?" A voice snaps. "Can you fix it?"
>
> Kai tenses, rigid from toes to ears in an instant, and it takes everything he has not to turn around. That's right, for a second there he forgot he was in the middle of an emergency all-hands meeting.

Chapter Notes

> Aaaahhhhh sorry this update took so long. TBH it was mostly finished this whole time, but between how hectic work has gotten and some minor fandom drama that made me write Happy Little Accidents out of pure spite, I only just now found time to add the finishing touches. Thanks for your patience!
>
> Special thanks to CerealEngineer for providing a quick proofread, a necessity since this chapter contains a lil reward just for them lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kai stays awake.

It's not like he has a choice.

He keeps one hand tangled in Yeonjun’s hair after the other man falls asleep, fingers carding through cherry-red strands in slow and steady arcs, timed to the soft little inhales and exhales breathed against his clavicles that Kai can hear, but not feel. His other arm lies draped over Yeonjun's waist, keeping him close, tightening just a bit whenever Yeonjun shifts where they're wrapped up in each other. There’s a palm splayed over the quiet space on the left side of Kai's chest, flexing every now and then as if seeking out the rhythm of something that’s no longer there.

Out of all of them, Yeonjun has always been the deepest sleeper, late and oftentimes difficult to rise. He’s distinctly restless now though, and Kai knows he wakes up more than once by the way he'll suddenly stiffen, choking on an inhale that trips in his lungs. It's not loud, by any means, and Kai suspects that none of the others would even notice it. But he does.

He's awake.

The night wears on.

On that first evening back aboard The Endolphin, the one Kai was actually conscious for, he'd been haunted by the silence. And while he's not any less so now, it's . . . Easier. While the hours haven't felt any shorter, dragging with the darkness and punctuated only by the low hums of The Endolphin's engines, the weight of them has lessened. At first, Kai had felt obligated to think, the lack of sensation and rest leaving him with only the tumultuous roil of his already fragmented mind. Though that had been while he was alone, and then, briefly, while he'd been with Soobin, terrified of doing something wrong as if he could sense how easily they would end up falling apart.

He's not scared to touch Yeonjun. Not in the same way, at least. Sure, he's wary of hurting him (again. Physically. *Mentally.*) but he's not held back by the fear that doing so will break them. If anything, Yeonjun *wants* to be touched. He hasn't shied away from the chill of Kai's faux body once, cuddling up close even in his sleep, a possessive arm thrown around Kai's middle. There's a warmth to it all that, despite not being able to feel, Kai finds more soothing than he has words for.

He traces out the empty spaces inside himself as the hours tick by and sinks into them, caught solidly in Yeonjun's gravity. In its own way, it's almost like being asleep, all those round-and-round thoughts left by the wayside as he listens to the gentle ins and outs Yeonjun's breathing, mind carefully, absently blank. The only time he stirs is when Yeonjun does, a hand smoothed over a suddenly taut spine, something soft murmured into the other man's hair, nonsense syllables that barely even pierce the air, to chase away whatever shadows woke him.

When he does think he turns over that freshly polished memory, tugging gently at the frayed ends of it on either side. He wants to follow the threads, uncover more, but there's nothing there to chase after. It's just the one memory, fogged around the borders and standing alone. Sort of. The more Kai feels around the fuzzy edges of it, the more he's certain that isn't entirely true. If the recollection of the gyro drop was there, available to be retrieved, then everything else must be too. His memories aren't gone, per say, but locked away, barricaded back for reasons he's sure he'll never understand. Were Kai a little less human, if they'd taken just a little more from him, he'd probably be able to make sense of it.

Luckily, they left enough of him intact that the motivations of the Gigye will never be something Kai can relate to.

Still, the suddenness of it all leaves him reeling well into the night, confusion mixing with the low simmering, ever present hope. Something must have triggered it, brushed the dust away enough for Kai to remember. There must have been a moment, there in the midst of the mess and tangle of his and Yeonjun's bodies and emotions that let it reemerge. For the life of him though, Kai can't think of what it was. Nothing they'd done or said had felt particularly universe altering, the physical and verbal affections traded too personal, private, for Kai to really consider them to be any kind of key.

It's likely, he thinks, that it had happened randomly. That's what makes the most sense, especially considering that the Gigye wouldn't program in something intentional like that.

Unless . . .

Unless it's not intentional.

Unless what happened is a flaw and not a feature.

Kai blinks up at the ceiling, the dimmed overhead lights that cast his former bedroom in a low glow leaving faint shadows dancing on the walls. Wouldn't that be interesting. They've always known that the Gigye's sole weakness is the fact that they're liable to make mistakes once. Just once.

Maybe Kai is one of those mistakes.

The arm around Kai's waist tightens, squeezing for a second as Yeonjun huffs out a sleepy, but distinctly awake note. He untangles their legs, another heavy exhale hitting the air as he stretches out along Kai's side, burying his face against Kai's shoulder and nuzzling against it before lifting his head to rub the heel of a hand over his eyes. "Time izzit?" he mumbles.

Cute. His cherry hair is all mussed on one side, the cheek that had lain against Kai's chest for hours pink from the continued contact, and even after he blinks a few times, it's obvious he's still half asleep. A smile curls at the corners of Kai's mouth, unbidden. Fuck, he's *missed this.* Hesitantly, Kai starts to card his fingers through Yeonjun's bangs, an odd mixture of grief and relief swirling in his chest when the other man readily leans into the touch, letting him unstick stray strands from his forehead, brush them back behind his ear. Kai forgets to answer the question, forgets he was even asked, focused on this instead, content when Yeonjun doesn't seem to mind in the slightest and instead merely snuggles closer, his chin resting on Kai's collarbone.

They lay like that for awhile, Yeonjun watching him through low-lidded eyes as Kai does his damndest to ingrain the moment into his very soul, brand it somewhere it can't be forgotten or taken away. There's no discomfort in the silence, not even when Yeonjun's gaze shifts from quiet ease to contemplative understanding as he realizes what Kai is doing. The arm around Kai's middle tightens again, just hard enough to feel.

It's Kai who speaks first and breaks the lull they've slipped into. "Sleep okay?" he murmurs.

"Mm," Yeonjun hums.

". . . Not too cold?"

Yeonjun's eyes narrow, and Kai's lips part in breathless surprise when he tries to wiggle impossibly closer, gluing himself further against Kai's side. "No," he insists. "You're warm where I've touched you, Kai-ya. If it was uncomfortable, I'd tell you."

Kai doubts he would, but he accepts the response anyways, tentative fingers trailing down Yeonjun's spine as he speaks. He doesn't seem cold at least, no visible goosebumps on his skin. His cheeks are still sporting that tired tint, too, dusty pink with warmth. "Okay," Kai concedes softly.

A grin briefly brightens Yeonjun's face. "Best sleep I've had in awhile, honestly."

"Oh?"

Yeonjun sighs, pressing close again, a leg thrown over Kai's thigh. "It's easier, you know," he mumbles, "having someone there. Most of the time, when I wake up in the middle of the night, it takes me ages to fall asleep again."

Oh . . . Kai's throat bobs, a reflex, swallowing around nothing as the implication sinks in. He supposes he'd guessed as much before, back when he'd first seen Yeonjun in his room through the security feed. But hearing it uttered aloud, the glaring reality that Yeonjun has been sleeping *alone* for long enough for him to describe the experience as *"most of the time,"* leaves him hollow.

"Do you . . . Do you use your own quarters at all anymore?" Kai asks weakly.

Yeonjun tenses against him, and Kai scrambles to hold him closer, convey without words that he doesn't want him to leave. It's obvious what Yeonjun's initial thought was in that moment, a fleeting spark of upset at the idea that Kai might not want him to stay. But it's gone as soon as it arrives, soothed away as Kai rolls onto his side, twining them closer together, nose to nose and chest to chest. "Hey," Kai murmurs. "I'm just curious. You don't have to answer." And he doesn't have to go anywhere, either.

"It's . . . Been awhile," Yeonjun admits after a beat. "But, uh, if you need . . ."

"No," Kai assures him quickly, the rest of the sentence entirely unnecessary. "I don't." He cocks a smile he doesn't quite feel. "I mean, I don't even sleep," he reminds, "what use do I have for a bedroom?"

"It's still your space," Yeonjun says tersely. "You should be able to have a place to keep stuff, at the very least."

Kai snorts. "Stuff? What stuff. My plushies I can't even feel? Clothes I only wear for the sake of propriety? Books I don't remember reading? Pictures I can't name all the faces in?" He hasn't looked at them, the collage of images he can see out of the corners of his eyes, just over Yeonjun's shoulder where they're stuck to the wall above the bed. There's no point.

The frown Yeonjun levels him with is probably earned, so Kai bears the brunt of it without protest. "Kai-ya," he whispers, "your life isn't over just because you lost sixteen years of it."

If Kai still had a heart, he's sure it would stutter in his chest, startled and tripping over the rush of conflicted emotions he can't give name to.

"I know," Yeonjun goes on, "that we can never guarantee how long we'll be here. But we do have time, Kai-ya. Isn't that something, at least? We can make *new* memories. They don't have to replace the old ones, but . . . I don't . . ." He sighs, leaning in to rest his forehead against Kai's. "I don't want to spend our days treating the past like it's better than the future, like what we regain, or remake, or- or *try again* is somehow *less* than what we had before." He chokes on something that Kai thinks is supposed to be a laugh, except it doesn't sound

right, rings too rigid, cracked. “Plus,” he adds, “there seems to be a chance you’ll get a little bit of the old you back anyways, so . . .”

Yeah. Yeah, there is. “I thought of something,” Kai murmurs, “that I want to keep here.”

“Hmm? What? I can help you track down your missing plushies if you want,” Yeonjun starts. “I think Taehyunie has one or two, and Beomgyu-ya definitely-”

Kai noses closer, palm splayed over the small of Yeonjun’s back when he murmurs, “You.”

It takes a second, Yeojun echoing back, “Me? Me what? I . . . *Oh* . . .” before he finally understands.

There was never a need for it before, what with the way they’d all been so intertwined. That’s what the purpose of the big bedroom was, when it was used and loveworn, warm rather than chilled and covered in dust. But Kai had made that space for five people, not two, and everything is still far too broken for him to consider returning to it now. It had felt so empty that night, with just him and Yeonjun (and, however briefly, Beomgyu), dauntingly large and vacant enough to swallow them whole. The two of them aren’t enough, not for that room. But Kai already knows they can be comfortable *here.*

Yeonjun stares at him, blinking rapidly in the veiled light of Kai’s old quarters, tangled in the sheets of Kai’s old bed and the limbs of his new body. “I . . . Are you sure?”

“Of course I am,” Kai returns easily. “There’s no reason for us to sleep apart if we don’t have to, right?”

“. . . But you don’t sleep,” Yeonjun states, as if he somehow thinks Kai has forgotten in the last few minutes.

Kai shrugs. “So? What else am I going to do with that time? Think myself in circles?” He tugs Yeonjun that half centimeter closer, waiting until he gets a tiny nod before leaning in to peck a kiss along the corner of the other man’s mouth, pleased when Yeonjun surges into it instantly, chasing after a second, and a deeper third. It’s like snow, the faint sensations melting away before Kai can grasp them, droplets slipping through his fingers. He relishes in it anyways, brushing aside the hollow pang with the solace that at least he has this. “I want to be here with you,” Kai murmurs against his lips when Yeonjun takes a breath. “I want you to stay.”

It seems like such a simple thing to say, an easy offer to accept, but Kai’s not stupid. There’s more to it than that, a quiet, pained acknowledgement that seeps into the tiny gaps between them, an agonizing reminder that doing this means accepting that, for now, it really is just the two of them. He hears it in the way Yeonjun sucks in a shallow, sharp inhale before he nods, and the sound settles inside his chest, heavy hearted. His fingers curl around Kai’s biceps, so tight that Kai almost instinctively winces as his systems register it. There’s something on the tip of his tongue, an unspoken, weighted thing he can’t seem to say, but maybe it should stay that way. Kai leans in again, nuzzling at Yeonjun’s cheek until he bites down on those incorporeal words and obliges. He cups his palms around Kai’s face when he kisses him, the gesture so gentle and familiar it makes Kai ache. “Okay,” he whispers. “Okay.”

“Hey,” Kai soothes. They’re so close now, close enough that were Kai still human, he’d be taking everyone of Yeonjun’s exhales into his own lungs. “You’re right, you know. You really are.”

Yeonjun laughs, a low, false little thing. “About what?”

“We can make new memories.” It’s true. “And- and we can- we can fall in love with each other all over again.” He wants so badly for it to be true. “You, and me, and Taehyunie, and Beomgyu-ya, and . . . And Soobin-ah . . .”

Kai likes the way Yeonjun’s eyes widen, how they dance with bright, brief mirth when Kai repeats all his reassurances right back at him. “Yeah,” Yeonjun whispers, and that at least is real. The surety, the hope. There’s no lie there, Yeonjun actually does believe that. And Kai wants to, too. “Yeah, we can.”

They’re going to start here, Kai decides as he buries his face in the crook of Yeonjun’s neck, the two of them together; Yeonjun, who loves so fiercely, so ardently and eternally, and Kai who came back with just enough hope to keep going.

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Technically, Kai isn't qualified for this. His courses on the arc had consisted of technical skills (coding, programming, hacking) and mechanical engineering. Or at least he's pretty sure they did. He doesn’t actually remember the classes themselves, so he’s mostly just going off of what he knows. The things he learned are still there, safely untouched, even if everything he did to gain those talents is absent. Anyways, the point is, Kai has no knowledge of biomechanics. That's a moot point though, since he can't fathom protesting when he sees the desperation in Taehyun’s eyes as he asks him to look at what remains of Beomgyu’s prosthetic.

It's in the same mess as it was a few nights prior, set aside on a cold, steel table in a corner of the medbay with all its loose and mangled parts spread out. Kai grimaces when he sees it, guilt gnawing in his chest at the sight of the twisted metal. Thankfully he recognizes a few of the basic pieces amidst the lot, shapes and mechanisms that are familiar, if smaller and made of different material than the sort of things he’s used to working with. He picks up the bent remains of what seems to be a pressure clamp, similar to the types used to seal a ship's airlocks, and isn't that just dramatic irony at its finest?

"Well?" A voice snaps. "Can you fix it?"

Kai tenses, rigid from toes to ears in an instant, and it takes everything he has not to turn around. That's right, for a second there he forgot he was in the middle of an emergency all-hands meeting.

A hand settles on the small of his back, gentle, and Kai sags beneath the touch. He doesn't dare meet Yeonjun’s eyes right now, steeling himself to instead face the speaker.

Soobin looks . . . *Rough* would be putting it nicely. His hair doesn't seem to have been combed since . . . Well. And if he’s changed clothes at all in the last few days, he’s clearly
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only done it once, the uniform shirt he’s clad with creased from having been slept in. Although that's really the only indication that he’s slept at all, actually. The bags under his eyes say otherwise. Still, he holds himself like a captain, standing tall with his arms folded over his chest, a position that would look intimidating on anyone else in the fleet, but on Soobin comes off as defensive and tired. He doesn't quite meet Kai’s eyes when he faces him, instead fixing his gaze somewhere over Kai’s shoulder. The line of his mouth, already thin and tense, trembles before he speaks again. "Are you going to answer me?"

Kai squares his shoulders. "This isn’t really my area of expertise," he admits. "I think we'd be better off getting a proper replacement from Meon Jigu, and-"

"I didn't ask you if you're an expert," Soobin says lowly, "or what you *think.* I asked if you could fix it."

The hand on Kai’s back clenches, fingers bunching up the fabric of his uniform. Funny, he thinks grimly, out of everything, he really never expected that this could be what hurt the most. He would have thought hearing that Beomgyu was so willing to *die* might be his breaking point, or watching Yeonjun cry after they'd each realized what they'd done to each other. But somehow, it's this; Soobin standing on the opposite side of the room, unable to look at him, talking to Kai like he would a total stranger. That's the worst thing. Because at least with Beomgyu and Yeonjun, he'd known they still loved him the same way he loved them, too. There’s nothing to buffer the sinking, awful weight that's dragging through Kai now, no reassurance that Soobin cares about him in any facet. Which makes sense, really, since Kai isn't the person Soobin knew anyways.

He wants to be, though. Or, at least he wants to be the sort of person Soobin can know anew.

"I can fix it," he says.

Soobin’s eyebrows furrow. It’s such a little thing, a barely-there wrinkle that leaves an achingly familiar crease in the middle between them, and then it’s gone. His expression is shuttered again on the tail end of the next ragged breath he takes, schooled behind a tired gaze and stiff posture. “We’ll be passing through the edges of Sculptor tomorrow,” he says, his tenor just as rigid as the rest of him. “There’s a resistance outpost on one of the outerlying planets. I need everyone to submit a list of supplies they need to me tonight by 19:00 at the latest, so Yeonjun-ah and I can-”

The hand on Kai’s back drops away, and Kai watches out of the corners of his eyes as Yeonjun takes a half step forward. “Uh, *no.* You’re not leaving the ship.”

The whole room chills as Soobin faces him, his eyes narrowed. “I don’t know why you think you get a say in-” he starts.

Yeonjun’s lips curl back from his teeth, a ghost of something that might have been a smile under better circumstances. “You want to strand The Endolphin without a proper pilot? Really? That’s fucking moronic, even for you, Soobinie.”

Soobin makes a low, angry sound in the back of his throat, and his body twitches like he means to crowd into Yeonjun’s space, let that wash of upset bleed into a more physical

confrontation, but something stops him. For a moment, Kai doesn't realize what, exactly, stalls the captain from surging forward, until he sees the way Soobin's gaze flickers to him, just for a fleeting second.

Yeah. *Yeah.* That makes sense. Of course he doesn't want to be any closer to Kai than he already is. As it stands, even with half the medbay between them, Soobin looks like he's ready to bolt at any second.

"Look," Yeonjun continues. "Beomgyu-ya *can't* fly the ship right now. You know that. I know that. He knows that. If something happens while you and I are planetside, do you really think Taehyunie and Kai-ya would be able to get out of it intact? They're *science* officers, Soobin-ah. Taehyunie can barely steer the thing into park, there's no way either of them could outrun a Gigye scouting ship, or god fucking forbid, The Red-"

"Then what do you suggest?" Soobin interrupts darkly. "You can't take Taehyun-ah, not while Beomgyu-ya is hurt."

Snorting, Yeonjun cuts straight to the inevitable punchline of this mess. "Obviously, I'll take Kai-ya."

Oh. Joy.

He's right. Kai knows that. There's no other way around it. No one else can, or *should* go, and Yeonjun can hardly drop himself off on an alien planet alone, resistance base or no. It *has* to be Kai. Either that, or . . .

"I know it's a ways away, but maybe we can hold out til we get back to Meon Jigu, and-"

"Not enough food," Taehyun whispers from where he's sat himself on Beomgyu's bed, the other man's head in his lap as he cards through his sweat-soaked hair. "Not enough medicine. And even if we could make it that far, well . . ."

Yeonjun lets out an acidic sounding snort. "Yeah, we're not doing that."

Kai glances between them, lips pursing. There's something weird in the air, something that's being said without words, but he can't quite grasp it. He doesn't dare look at Soobin to try and get a better read on it though.

He doesn't even glance his way when Soobin heaves out a breath and mutters a vehement, "*Fuck.*"

"We'll be quick," Yeonjun says, like that makes it any better. His palm has found a home against Kai's back again, pressing just hard enough to feel. "In and out, easy. I *promise.* You'll barely even miss us."

Kai's pretty sure Yeonjun's the only one out of the two of them that will be missed, but he refrains from stating as much, staring instead at the floor as he's talked around.

"It's not about how fast you'll get back," Soobin growls, "it's about whether or not you'll come back *at all.*"

He's looking at him this time, Kai knows without lifting his gaze from the floor to confirm. Soobin's eyes bore into him for the barest second, and then dart away once more, and it takes everything in him not to flinch from the weight of what that poignantly timed glare says.

"*Hey,*" Yeonjun whispers. There's no venom in the syllable, nothing chastising or defensive, and for a heartbeat he doesn't have, Kai is almost hurt by it, the rush of grief only stalled once Yeonjun crosses the room in a series of quick, heavy strides. Kai's glance follows his path, eyes still downcast so he never quite has to meet Soobin's as he does it, but it's still enough for him to see what tore the bite out of Yeonjun's words.

Soobin's still standing like he's been carved from ice, back and shoulders stiff, but his walled-up facade has cracked. Even with the scowl marring his face, Kai can see how scared he is, the way one of his hands is gripping the arm folded over his chest, white-knuckled and shaking, his eyes wide and the corners of his mouth trembling. At the same time Yeonjun moves forward, Kai steps back, back and back and *back* until he can brace his palms on the sink on the complete opposite side of the room just so Soobin has the space he clearly needs to even *breathe.*

"Hey," Yeonjun repeats. He's so careful, the slow way he lifts his hands to take Soobin's face in them, guide his gaze down to him and away from Kai gentle enough to hurt. "*Baby.*"

He doesn't want to see this, Kai decides suddenly. It feels too private, too personal, and definitely not meant for him. The door to the medbay isn't too far, and he keeps his back to the wall as he eases himself towards it, one quiet bit at a time. He doesn't look when Soobin leans his forehead against Yeonjun's, tries to erase the choked, anguished little noise the other man makes from his mind as soon as he hears it. He makes it into the hall without anyone stopping him, casting a last glance over his shoulder against his better judgement just in time to see Yeonjun's mouth moving around a softly murmured affection that makes Soobin's whole body sag against him, fraught exhaustion giving way to tired agony.

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The Ursa Minor is Beomgyu's fighter.

The name had been a bit of an inside joke at first, coined by Yeonjun after both its size and his nickname for its pilot. As far as fighters go it's small, only able to fit two people inside without any room for cargo, which is why Kai spends a better part of his midnight hours making sure the storage pod is carefully fixed to the back of it. They haven't had to use The Ursa Minor like this very often, most places they've stopped for supplies are happy to host The Endolphin, its sleek build now recognizable to most of the resistance. It's not meant to tote cargo at all, and Kai's wary of why they need it to do so now, especially at an outpost this far out.

Technically, the Sculptor Galaxy is well outside of the known Gigye hunting grounds. He'd pulled up the starmap of their destination as soon as he was alone, Endolphin hovering curiously over his shoulder while he poured over what little was known about the territory. They'll be stopping at a planet controlled by the Panttaur, a species that is allied only in the vaguest sense. Technically, anyone who *isn't* Gigye is on the same side, a truce upheld for a common goal at best. The air there isn't even breathable for humans, and with the system's
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more distant sun, the chill merely serves as another reason for Kai to further question the choice to stop there rather than somewhere where they'll be under less mistrusting eyes. As far as he can tell, there aren't even any human refugees in this entire galaxy, which will only make bargaining for what they need that much more difficult.

Distantly, Kai just hopes Panttaur are well versed enough in Intergala that they won't break Yeonjun's promise that the supply stop will be anything other than quick and easy.

Once he's sure the storage pod is secure and programmed, Kai steps inside the ship to check that he's able to detach and reattach it from the control panel. He frowns when he has to brush away dust from the console. It's not as thick as it had been in the big bedroom, but it still tells a story he'd rather not dwell on, especially once he realizes that the access code he was given to view the strength of the gravitational magnetism is clearly Yeonjun's, rather than Beomgyu's. In fact, a regretful dive into the user log reveals that Beomgyu's code hasn't been used *at all* in the year Kai missed. There are just four entries, all of them Yeonjun, with the most recent being a whole five months prior.

Kai closes out the log, blinking through a sharp tug of grief that makes his vision flicker before he shakes it off.

He's only just stepped off The Ursa Minor's boarding ramp when a hand grips the front of his shirt and slams him back against the still ajar entryway. Kai gasps on reflex alone, fingers jolting up to clamp around the wrist holding onto him, too tight, before he registers what's happened. If the grip hurts though, there's no tangible proof. Instead, Soobin's gaze is steely and cold, unflinching as he hisses, "What *the fuck* do you think you're doing?"

Somehow, he looks *worse* than how he had in the medbay a few hours ago. There's a telling red-tinge to his eyes, and his breath stutters out of him on an exhale that gives away too much. The hand clenched into the neckline of Kai's uniform shakes. This time, his fear is so much more obvious, palpable in every inch of him. Kai scrabbles at the wrist of the hand pinning him, fueled by pure instinct to fight back against a danger that no longer affects him. His eyes dart to Soobin's hips, one at a time, but find no holster.

"Are you trying to sabotage-"

"Why the hell would I do that?" Kai states. He can't seem to make himself let go of Soobin's wrist, some kind of panicked, ingrained sense of self preservation winning out against knowledge, but his tone is flat. "Wouldn't doing something that stupid just get me killed too?"

Soobin's eyes narrow. For a moment, Kai is impressed with his resolve, right up until Soobin's voice cracks when he chokes out, "If *anything* happens to him . . ."

"It won't," Kai swears before he can finish that awful, awful thought. "It won't. I promise. I-I'll make sure he comes back."

"If he doesn't, I'll kill you."

Kai almost believes him. Despite how it wavers, Soobin's tone is *vicious,* tinged with that same terrified anguish that had held a blaster pointed at Kai's head. But his grip on Kai is too unsteady, held up only by sheer force of will. He could pry it off at any time, Kai realizes as he watches Soobin fumble to maintain it. And he still can't quite meet Kai's eyes, that furious gaze sliding away every time he tries.

"I- . . ." Kai swallows around nothing. "If it . . . If it comes down to it, I'll let you."

He means that, truly. If something happens to Yeonjun, Kai would accept that fate with open arms.

The hand fisting the front of his uniform drops away, and Kai jolts to try and catch it, desperate suddenly for even such an unpleasant form of contact. But Soobin stumbles back a step too abruptly for Kai to do so.

His eyes are wide, not so much scared this time as utterly *stricken.* Temptation and old instinct call Kai to reach for him, a compulsion that never comes to fruition when Soobin almost trips over himself to put even more space between them. Despite how bloodshot his eyes already are, tears well up to stain them again, and Kai stays still, frozen in place as Soobin hiccups on a high, wounded sound. Neither of them says anything else, perhaps because there isn't really anything *to* say. Soobin takes another step back, and then another, until he's off the boarding ramp and his shoulders bump into the hangar door separating them from the rest of The Endolphin. His face is so pale, and his chest heaves with every strangled breath he takes as if each one is a struggle, a thought process he has to work through just to stay alive.

"Soobin-ah . . ." Kai tries, knowing even as he says it that he shouldn't have spoken at all.

Soobin flinches as if struck, and he gropes behind him for the panel to the hangar door. It opens with a hushed hiss of air once he presses a palm to it, and Kai stays rooted to the spot as Soobin all but falls over himself to bolt from the room.

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There are two seats inside The Ursa Minor, moulded together back to back, one for the pilot to face forward, and the other for a sharpshooter to command the ship's turret blasters, two parts of a singular whole. Neither of them are places Kai has ever sat, so when Yeonjun gestures for him to do so, indicating the position he would usually helm, Kai can't help but stutter on a confused little, "Huh?"

Yeonjun only lifts an eyebrow at him, already sliding behind the pilot's controls. "What do you mean, 'huh?' Someone has to man the firepower."

Oh. Great. Cool. Fantastic.

It's not like there's anywhere else for him to sit, and Kai stares at the seat with mounting apprehension before he finally wills himself to take it. Like Yeonjun had mentioned the night before, this is nowhere near his forte. He can't even remember if his training had included how to handle a fighter's turrets, and his track record with a personal blaster is already
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abysmal enough. Yeonjun spares him a moment of attention though as they get situated, reaching back to squeeze Kai's shoulder as he boots up the ship's operating systems to activate the consoles in front of their respective positions.

Kai grabs the helmet that drops within his reach, tugging it on until the visor flickers to life to reveal a view of The Endolphin's hangar. It's an odd sensation, and he twists his head from side to side as he straps himself in and moves to grip the heavy turret sticks, one in each hand. He keeps his thumbs off the triggers, carefully testing that their locks are both still clicked into place before he twists to glance towards the hangar door. With the sharpshooter helment's 360 capabilities, he can just make out Soobin standing on the other side of the thin strip of viewing glass, his chin dipped down towards his sternum and a palm braced to the pane.

"He didn't hurt you last night, did he?" Yeonjun asks softly.

Kai shakes his head, regretting it instantly as the action spins his view outside the ship around at unnatural angles. Sometimes he's happy he can't get nauseous anymore. "No."

If anything, Soobin seemed only to have spooked himself, though Kai still can't figure out how. The shift between anger and anguish had been too quick to parse out, and with the way things stand, Kai isn't sure he'll ever know exactly what happened between them during those tense minutes on The Ursa Minor's boarding ramp.

"He's scared of me," Kai whispers, more to himself than Yeonjun. He feels stupid as soon as the confession leaves him. Of course Soobin is scared of him, he doesn't *know* him. Or at least he doesn't think he does. And Kai still can't decide if he's right in doing so or not, stretched thin between wanting to go back to the way things were, and forging on ahead as someone new.

Yeonjun reaches to give his shoulder another squeeze. He neither refutes or confirms the claim, and Kai closes his eyes as the weight of what that means settles in his chest.

"Ready to drop," Yeonjun says, and the words echo into Kai's ears through the helmet, clear with that transmitted, metallic edge of an open coms line. "Planning to return to dock around 20:00 at the latest."

"You have your emergency beacon?" Soobin's tone is measured, but Kai doesn't miss the audible thickness in it, like every word of the protocol chatter is a struggle.

"Copy," Yeonjun hums. "Radar says we have approximately a fifteen minute flight to the outpost. We'll ping The Endolphin from The Ursa Minor once we've landed, and before we head back." His professional cadance shifts, and Kai smiles at the fond lilt that traces around his next words. "Try not to blow the place up while we're gone."

Soobin exhales, the huff of annoyance he expresses just sweet enough to make Kai ache in all the worst ways. "I'll do my best."

The hangar doors creak open below The Ursa Minor, the hazy atmosphere of the planet peeking into view as Yeonjun flicks the engines on. Kai can hear Soobin breathing in his ears,

and he can't help but use the advantage of the sharpshooter's helmet to watch him as the fighter slowly eases out of The Endolphin's hull. Soobin still has a hand to the glass, his dark hair sticking to his forehead where he's pressed that too against the surface, his mouth twisted into a tight, thin line. He doesn't look any better or worse for wear than he had the night before, and Kai watches his next exhale fog up the glass as the chill of space cools the hangar.

There's a click in his ears, the distinct sound of the coms feed being switched from public to private. Kai jolts, stiffly upright as the crackling sound of Soobin's voice utters a strained, "Kai-ya, I-"

The feed cuts, the way it's meant to when the fighter parts fully from The Endolphin in unknown territory while both their shield systems are up. Kai almost claws the helmet off his head, something hot and wild and half mad flaring in him when whatever Soobin had been about to say gets lost in the silence. There's no doubt in his mind that it would have likely been another reprimand, a reiteration of what was said last night, but what if . . .

What if.

It takes him a second to calm down, his neck craned back to catch a final glimpse of The Endolphin above them as Yeonjun rockets them towards the planet. There's another click in his ears, indicating that Yeonjun has turned on the internal communications of The Ursa Minor before he says, "I know you're not big on flying, babe. Just try to relax. I'll let you know if I need you to unlock the turrets, okay?"

Kai tears his gaze away from the place The Endolphin was, by now already well out of sight, and loosens his deathgrip on the turret sticks. "Okay," he returns.

The flight down to the surface is relatively smooth sailing. It's obvious that the outpost, despite its distance from the main body of the resistance hubs, is relatively popular. They aren't the only ship heading that direction, though most of the ones Kai spots are the size of The Endolphin or larger. The sight is more unsettling than he'd like it to be. A year is a long time, and not just in a personal sense. This is not the first instance where Kai has found himself wondering just how quickly the Gigye managed to expand their already wide reach. However, he doesn't recognize the makes of any of the crafts that glide on ahead of them, an indication that they are, as he'd suspected before, the only humans who've come this far in awhile.

Yeonjun sets them down on the far corner of a massive landing pad. The outpost has a rather traditional layout, stretching wide in grid-like streets that boast both shops and settlements, all sheltered into a nestled dip of a towering mountain that seems to be shielding it from a lot of the planet's snowy climate. The two of them bustle around The Ursa Minor once they land, checking oxygen filters and clothing before they dare to open the door to the outside world. Yeonjun keeps stopping to fix Kai's hood, adjust his visor, and pull the thick scarf over the filter covering the lower half of his face a little tighter. "I know you don't need any of this stuff," he says, and Kai frowns at the way that admission shudders out of him, "but try to keep it on, alright? Don't let any of it slip. We really don't want to be standing out around here."

Once again, Kai is struck by the sense that something is being said that he isn't meant to fully understand. He doesn't protest though, too aware of how easily wasted time in this kind of situation can lead them astray. Instead, he just nods, obligingly tugging the scarf more securely around himself when they finally step outside.

If the way Yeonjun shivers from head to toe when the first blast of the planet's air hits them, it must be bitterly cold. Kai shuffles closer to him, moving towards the windward side of his body in an effort to block a bit of the chill. Beneath his cloak he shifts his arm up, bending his wrist to press a forefinger into the pad around his forearm. On the back of The Ursa Minor, the storage pod clicks free, hovering after them as they make their way towards the bustling streets.

Yeonjun's brought a tablet with him, disconnected from The Endolphin and carrying only a map and the list of supplies they'd compiled. "Let me know when you see the parts you need for Beomie," he mutters as he skims down it, gloved hands scrolling through everything as he starts to scan the stalls and shops they weave between. "I'll focus on the other shit."

The pod is burdened with the majority of what they need by the time Kai finally finds a place that seems to have most of what he's after. He's been keeping his head down, hours dragging by as he and Yeonjun flitted back and forth through the streets of the market. The clamp that catches his eye isn't quite the sort of model he's used to though, and Kai stares at it for a long moment where it's been laid out amidst other various parts from an apparent variety of makers across a low shelf on the table. He can feel the attendant's eyes on him, and after a few too many seconds of staring, a rough paw taps at his shoulder.

As Kai had suspected, the Panttaur's Intergala is fairly stilted, the large, rounded shape of their pads making the hand signs more difficult to read, and the shopkeep has to repeat themselves twice before Kai understands that they want to know what he's looking for. *"Parts for a prosthetic?"* he signs back, pointing to the clamp.

The Panttaur gives him an unreadable look before turning and lifting a box out from beneath another shelf. They set it down on the table, the things inside clanking together loudly. Lifting their paw again, Kai recognizes the sign for *"Size?"*

Kai holds his hands apart in what he hopes is the approximate length of Beomgyu's leg. Why that makes the Panttaur roll their eyes, he's not sure, but they bound back towards a curtain behind the stall, heavy steps of their four legs leaving five-toed prints in the snow-dusted ground behind them. They emerge again a moment later, a second box tucked under one arm and their tail flicking back and forth in obvious agitation as they set that one down in front of him too.

Both boxes are a mess, their contents obviously seen as scrap by the attendant. The parts jumbled together within are of various origins, many far too big to fit someone human sized. His heart in his throat, Kai notes that the few that are end up being of Gigye make, and he hesitates before setting aside each one of those that he finds. The Panttaur is staring at him again, the uncomfortable flick of their tail shifting to a wider, waryer back and forth swish. Slowly, Kai dares to glance up at them as he signs a hesitant *"Battery?"*

To his relief, that seems to relax the shopkeep's entire demeanor. They huff out a breath that makes their whiskers twitch, ears that had been flattened against their skull perking up as they bound over to the other side of the stall to show off a collection of different batteries. It makes sense, Kai realizes as he turns one of them over in his hands and asks after its lifespan on a charge, the Gigye don't run on this sort of stuff, their lifesource likely the same, unknown power that's currently spinning inside Kai's chest. If they'd thought he might be a cyborg, he's set them at ease by unintentionally implying he's building something a real Gigye would never have use for.

Kai's just finished paying for everything when Yeonjun grabs him by the elbow. His grip is harsh, his eyes wild, and the storage pod bumps against his back as he steers Kai away from the stall. "Quick," he hisses, "this way."

He tugs on Kai hard enough that Kai can feel the urgency in the motion, steering him and the pod into the murky darkness of the nearest alley. "Against the wall," he whispers, every word muffled by the oxygen filter and scarf covering his face. "Don't move, head down." He puts a hand to the back of Kai's neck, pushing until Kai does as asked, staring down at the snow-blown stones beneath their feet as a shadow covers them.

Even though he can't feel the cold, Kai shivers as it passes over. It can't be a Gigye ship, can it? Not here, not without everyone in the outpost panicking. As far as he can tell, it's only him and Yeonjun that are hiding from it. The sun starts to peek into the alleyway again, and Kai chances a glance up at the sky.

His stomach sinks as he recognizes the flash of bronzed-orange hull. *No.* Why . . .

"The Horangie?" he chokes.

Yeonjun's hand on his neck slips before pushing his head down again. "Don't look at it!" he snaps. "Don't move! Just wait for it to pass, then we're getting the fuck out of here."

Why? The Horangie is a *human* ship, its crew one they've worked with before on joint missions. Why are they hiding from it?

The truth hits Kai like a blaster to the chest, realization sending a horrified shudder through his frame. Yeonjun's other hand shifts to his arm, steadying him. "You *didn't* . . ." He whispers, knowing even as he says it that they *absolutely did.*

This is why they're so far out.

This is why they can't go back to Meon Jigu.

This is why they let the supplies, vital things like food and medicine, get so low.

Yeonjun's hands on him tighten, the warmth of him that Kai can't feel pressed up against his side as he says, hoarse and vehement, "Defecting was the *only* way to find you, Kai-ya."

"No-"

“They wouldn’t let us look for you. They told us to leave you for dead,” Yeonjun hisses. “They wanted to ground BG *for good.* Of course we defected. And none of us regret it, do you hear me?”

Kai stares at him, eyes wide as the words sink in, the gravity of them unable to find solid purchase in his mind. They defected. *They defected.* And for what? For *Kai?* Kai, who came back unwhole, pieced back together with different parts? Kai, who Soobin can’t look at, and Beomgyu can’t love?

“It was worth it,” Yeonjun says fiercely. “Baby, look at me, it was *worth it.* ”

Was it, though?

“You-” Kai starts, stops, stricken. “You’ll have to keep running. *Forever.* How is that worth it?”

Yeonjun scoffs, a sharp, dismissive sound. “Don’t say that like you’ve never thought about it, Kai-ya. I know you have. We all have. What means more to you, sweetheart? The ‘cause?’ Or the crew?”

What a stupid fucking question. “You,” Kai answers without hesitation. “*You.* The crew.”

The answering grin Yeonjun gifts him with stirs something in his chest. “Exactly. Now, put your bag in the pod, and lets get the fuck out of here before we get rounded up and carted off for some kind of reeducation bullshit.”

Kai can’t help but frown at the implication. Orders or not, that doesn’t really sound like something the people aboard The Horangie are capable of. But he can’t argue that point, not after a year wherein so much has already changed. He nods, shoving the bag of parts for Beomgyu’s prosthetic into the storage pod before they creep down the alley in the opposite direction from whence they came.

It sinks in slowly as Yeonjun guides them through the sharp turns back towards the landing pad where they left The Ursa Minor. The five of them are going to be running for the rest of their lives, either from the Gigye or other ships from Meon Jigu. While it’s the sort of fantasy Kai had held onto before, unreachable, it feels odd to have it in his grasp now. They’re not beholden to anyone. The war is no longer theirs to bear the burden of. In theory, they could all just disappear into the furthest depths of the universe. Maybe they will, eventually. There are countless habitable planets out there, ones where they could easily settle down and just *be,* unshackled from the chains of duty and the greater good.

Kai’s vision flickers, and he almost feels like he could laugh, a smile, bitter but no less real, pulling at his lips. “Fuck,” he sighs.

“Yeah,” Yeonjun huffs, agreeable even though Kai’s sure he’s not quite aware of what exactly he’s agreeing with. He reaches behind him, taking one of Kai’s hands in his and squeezing. “Let’s just make it through the day first though, okay? One thing at a time.”

They've maneuvered their way out into busier streets again, and Kai sticks as close as he can to Yeonjun's back as they weave between shoppers and stalls alike, the pod following along in their wake. It seems the arrival of The Horangie has stirred everyone up, the ship likely far too recognizable for it to be mistaken for just another run of the mill resistance craft. Kai tries not to make eye contact with anyone as they move, but he can feel various gazes lingering on them anyways. They're standing out too much, he thinks as Yeonjun dodges around a hulking, muscled alien covered in spikes that snarls down at them when they pass. Kai flashes them the Intergala sign for *"Sorry"* over his shoulder, but it only makes the alien's scowl deepen.

"I think," Kai whispers slowly, clinging to Yeonjun's arm to stay as close as possible now, "that we're in trouble."

Yeonjun frowns, but doesn't respond, merely quickening his steps. The crowd has started to part for them, and while that certainly makes the path ahead easier, it's not a good sign. Kai fumbles for the control panel on his forearm, bringing the display up to urge the storage pod ahead. It only takes him a few taps to activate the autopilot feature, and it zips off and away in an instant, barreling through the street heedless of anyone and anything left in its way in its haste to return to The Ursa Minor. Yeonjun stops for a heartbeat as it disappears into the throng, his grip on Kai's hand tightening before he heaves in a breath and nods. "Okay. Right. Time to run."

If it comes down to it, Kai figures he could probably keep going as long as he needed to. He can't get tired, he can't burn out. And if he has to, he could carry Yeonjun too, the other man's weight almost nothing when Kai doesn't have any muscles to strain. For now though, they keep pace together, hand in hand as they dart through the crowd towards the still far-off landing pad. No one inhibits them, instead jumping out of their way with wide eyes and fearful expressions, skittering into the shelters of homes and shops when Kai and Yeonjun weave too close to the sides of the streets. Whether they think they're Gigye, or human resistance members, Kai isn't sure, and doesn't much care. His hood has fallen, pooling around his shoulders as they duck into another alley, another sidestreet, and his scarf has slipped down to reveal the oxygen filter he doesn't actually need. Yeonjun is in the same shape, his cherry-red hair sticking out even in the middle of the mess of different species. He's panting, his strides no shorter but his frame shaking when he pulls Kai against a wall just as the hum of familiar engines rumbles overhead.

It's The Horangie again, and Kai watches it pass by in full this time, tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. The ship is aptly named, the shadow it casts upon them as it flies by leaving Kai jittery and feeling distinctly hunted. Beside him, Yeonjun huddles against the wall, breathing heavily, his forehead on Kai's shoulder as he tries to keep still. He's too thin, Kai thinks for what he's sure is the hundredth time, but now the thought leaves him cold. He's too thin. He doesn't have the energy he used to. He won't be able to keep running long enough to make it to the landing pad if they stick with the pace they've been at. Kai turns to look at him. "I can carry you."

"No," Yeonjun snaps. "Absolutely not. I'm fine. I just-"

Whatever he was about to say, whatever false insistence he would have made, Kai will never know. Someone shouts in a language Kai doesn't speak, and he twists around to see the Panttaur he'd bought the parts from pointing at them from the mouth of the alley. They're flanked by two of their fellows, each far larger than the shopkeep and both sporting weapons Kai has never seen before, long metal sticks sparking firey, electric energy from their blunt ends. It doesn't take an idiot to know that something like that is going to be more than enough to seriously maim or even kill.

Shit.

Kai stares, familiar resignation notching at home in his chest. Yeonjun yelps as Kai grabs him, pressing the other man firmly behind him with an unrelenting grip. "Kai-ya!"

"Walk backwards," Kai whispers, taking a step back himself so that Yeonjun is forced to as well. "Keep going. Don't let go of me."

Yeonjun's hands shake where they snag into the fabric of his cloak, the only part of Kai he can reach with the way Kai's shielding him, grip too tight on his arms. "Kai-ya," he repeats, stricken. "Kai-ya, we have to- we need to run. We need to *run.*"

He won't make it, Kai thinks bitterly. If they run, Yeonjun will fall behind. "Don't let go," Kai says again. "Just keep moving." He can hear Yeonjun suck in a sharp, terrified breath, and he almost dares to imagine he feels the heat of the exhale against the back of his neck. If they can make it to the other side of the alley, Kai can scoop him onto his back where there will be enough room for them to turn, the corner hiding them for that vital second Kai needs to make sure he can do it without exposing Yeonjun to whatever the fuck energy is radiating from the Panttaurs' weapons. Just a little further. He just needs to get them a little further, and he can keep his promise to Soobin.

Yeonjun screams as one of the Panttaurs lunges forwards.

The sparking stick jabs into Kai's chest, dead center, right against the place that would already bear a scar were he still made of flesh and blood. For a split second time seems to stand still, the harsh and sudden weight of the weapon all Kai is able to register before that flare of energy suddenly erupts from the blunt end and surges *into him.*

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

Everything in Kai locks up, faux muscles seizing and stiffening as the pain wracks through him, tearing a noise out of his throat that eclipses Yeonjun's panicked wail. His own screams echo in his head as his legs buckle and he crumples to the ground. He tries to let go of Yeonjun, but can't, his hands only clamping around the other man's arms harder as he tries, every convulsion that jolts through him keeping the grip tight. He can't even speak, too overwhelmed with the agony to attempt to, his head thrown back as he screams and screams and *screams.*

A blaster shot shatters part of the alley wall above them, another singing the ground between Kai's writhing body and the Panttaurs' paws. One of their assailants shouts, and the stick that had struck Kai clatters to the stones as it's dropped. He twists his head away, his torso, trying to put at least some of himself between them and Yeonjun again even as Yeonjun finally pries one of his hands off to thread his fingers into Kai's hair. "Kai-ya," he chokes. "*Kai-ya!*"

It hurts.

Kai's eyes are closed when the scuffle starts, unable to stay open as he seizes up again, the pain rippling out from the center of his chest in waves. But he still has a grip on Yeonjun, still can feel the shaking touch of a hand in his hair. He can hear the hissing snarls of the Panttaurs, the whirr of the weapon that wasn't dropped before something explodes behind him, shattering one of the alley walls. He pulls on the arm he has ahold of, tugging until Yeonjun's head bumps into his sternum, his breath ghosting hot against Kai's collarbone as he shields him from the blast. Someone shouts, a distinctly human noise, and blaster fire rings in Kai's ears as he tucks Yeonjun as close as he can to his chest.

The pain ebbs lower in increments, flowing out from where it began bit by bit, easing from the center of Kai's chest until it's only lingering in the outermost parts of him. "It's okay," Yeonjun says, his face pressed into the curve of Kai's throat, between his chin and shoulder where Kai has forced him as close to the ground as he can. "It's okay." He's crying, the hand in Kai's hair shaking and the drip of tears wet on Kai's faux skin. "It's okay, baby. It's okay."

Kai's vision wavers when he cracks his eyes open again. It takes everything he has to get an arm under himself, trembles still wracking his body as he uses his other hand to tilt Yeonjun's face up. There's a nasty cut on his cheek, probably the mark of debris Kai didn't quite manage to block, but his gaze is fierce beneath the visor, determined despite the tears streaking his skin. "Can you stand?" Kai asks.

"Can *you?*" Yeonjun parries back hoarsely. "Kai-ya, I thought they'd *killed you.* You screamed like you were being ripped in half!"

Kai decides not to tell him that he very much still feels like that's exactly what happened. Instead, he casts a wary glance over his shoulder.

The Panttaurs, two of them at least, are gone. The one who had struck Kai is lying dead in the alley, its stripes streaked with the same silver blood that's starting to pool beneath its body. There's a blaster burn on one of its arms, another on a foreleg, warning shots that clearly went unheeded, a detail Kai notes only because the one on its head went all the way through, carving a clean hole right between its ears to ricochet back out the other side and leave a similar wound in its torso. Yeonjun has lifted his head to follow his gaze, freezing as his eyes find the responsible party, the hand in Kai's hair clenching hard enough to hurt.

Normally, Kai would not consider himself easily intimidated, but there's something unsettling about seeing someone of Lee Jihoon's size standing over a body twice his height and stature, his blaster still sizzling in his hand. He lifts an eyebrow when he catches Kai staring, but otherwise stays where he is, one foot planted in the back of the slain Panttaur like it might still get to its feet and charge at them again even though it is, in fact, very much dead.

Kai's too shaky to protest when Yeonjun curls an arm around the back of his head. "We're not going anywhere with you," he says through his teeth, a statement that doesn't seem to phase Jihoon in the slightest. His eyebrow only arches higher.

"Whoa, okay, *whoa,* everyone take a breath."

Yeonjun stiffens further, sitting up with an arm still holding Kai against him as someone strides past them with their hands raised in universal surrender.

Unlike his partner, Kim Mingyu has never been an intimidating presence in his entire life, a fact only confirmed by the way he grimaces when he sees the silvery blood spreading across the ground at his feet. "Oh, *ew.* Great, Jihoon-ah. Good job. This probably breaks whatever pact we have with the Panttaurs. Soonyoung-hyung is going to be *pissed,* you know he's been trying to get dicked down by one for ages."

Jihoon scoffs, but still doesn't comment on that little tidbit of way-too-much information. He removes his foot from the corpse of the Panttaur, leaning down to pick up the weapon it had been wielding as he strides their way. Kai tenses, but finds he doesn't have the energy to do much else, panic flaring in him when he realizes he can barely move at all now. Pain is still radiating from his limbs, trembling down his spine, and he can't even sit up enough to try and put himself between Yeonjun and the other man, let alone do anything more to protect him.

Yeonjun sucks in a startled inhale when Jihoon flips the stick around to hand it to him, the end that clearly isn't sparking with electricity and flame tapping impatiently at Yeonjun's shoulder. "Might want to keep this," he intones. "So your medic can figure out why it nearly fried your cyborg here."

It's blunt, and under different circumstances, a bit cruel, but Kai doesn't feel like shying away from the truth even as Mingyu snaps out a scolding tsk of, "*Jihoon-ah!*" under his breath.

Ignoring him, Jihoon goes on, "You have two minutes tops to pull yourselves together before those guys come back with reinforcements. Get up."

Honestly, Kai's not sure if he can. Even with Yeonjun pulling him to his feet, he feels like someone twisted the whole planet off kilter. His legs shake, and when he tries to take a step his feet feel like they're made of lead and needles, tiny spikes of agony shooting up past his knees and into the rest of him until he groans.

"That doesn't sound good," Mingyu mutters unhelpfully. "Do you want me to take a look at him? I mean, even if I don't know much about Gigye biomechanics, he's still . . ." He makes a weird, curving gesture with both hands. ". . . He's basically still human shaped?"

Kai shakes his head. It's not like this will kill him. Probably. "I'm alright." Yeonjun's eyebrows furrow, his lips parting to refute the obvious lie, but Kai leans into him before he can say anything, bumping their foreheads together until Yeonjun's bangs tickle his skin. "I can make it to the ship," he swears. "If you help me."

"Okay," Yeonjun whispers.

Whatever crowds had bustled aside for them before have entirely dispersed from the market when the four of them emerge out onto one of the main streets again. Kai has an arm around Yeonjun's shoulder, though he's doing his damndest not to lean too much weight on him, all too aware of how tired the other man is, too. At least the empty roads make the going easier, their pace faster without shoppers to dodge around. Some of the stalls are tipped over, wares scattered across the pathways, but Kai doesn't spare any of the chaotic remains more than a passing glance, too focused on the nearing sight of the landing pad to wonder where everyone went.

He's limping by the time they reach The Ursa Minor, and he only pauses long enough to check that the storage pod has securely docked itself before he lets Yeonjun lead him into the ship. Kai sags into the second seat as soon as he can, shuddering as the helmet lowers over his head and presses a little too tightly around his ears. Yeonjun is breathing hard again, leaning over the pilot's console to start the engines before he trips back towards the still open door. "What are you guys going to do?"

"Cover you, probably," Jihoon says. "You really think you'll get out of here in one piece if we don't? Both of you can barely stand, there's no way you can outrun *and* outgun whatever the Panttaurs are planning to chase you with."

". . . You'll get in a lot of trouble for this."

Mingyu laughs. "Yeah, uh, the fleet's been kind of a mess since you guys left, so that's not an issue. At best, we'll get a little slap on the wrist, and at worst . . ."

"Our ship is bigger than yours," Jihoon states blandly. "And more well supplied. We'll get by."

That's enough for Yeonjun, it seems, and the next time Kai blinks through his flickering vision, the door of the ship is closed, and the other man is strapping him in with shaking hands. "Unlock the triggers," he says when Kai looks up at him. "Don't shoot unless you have to, and if you do, try not to hit The Goyangi, please. They just saved our asses."

"Kay," Kai whispers, wincing at how weak his voice comes out, especially when Yeonjun's whole face crumples with visceral worry.

"Just- just try and stay with me, baby," Yeonjun pleads, cupping Kai's chin in his hands, thumbs softly soothing over the hinges of his jaw. "I know that thing fucked you up, but I really can't lose you, alright? Stay with me."

Kai nods.

With the view from the helmet, Kai can see The Horangie hovering overhead, its fighter, The Goyangi, parked beside them on the landing pad. They've been given enough space for takeoff, but it's obvious what the plan is here, and Kai grips the turret sticks for dear life as Yeonjun takes up the helm and lifts The Ursa Minor into flight.

They're barely in the air before someone shoots at them. The blast hits the ground between their ship and The Goyangi, almost perfectly timed with Yeonjun activating the coms so that

Kai can hear Soonyoung viciously swear right in his ear. “Holy *shit* what have you gotten us into?!”

“Just fly the ship, idiot,” Jihoon sighs.

“Shields up,” Yeonjun says, seemingly ignoring the chatter entirely. “Are you taking point, or rear, hyung?”

“Rear,” Soonyoung replies instantly. “Lock and load.” He makes a kissing sound into the coms, and Kai would gag if he could, especially when Yeonjun laughs and returns the gesture. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“If you do a barrel roll, I *will* scream,” Mingyu warns, a threat that is apparently ignored as The Goyangi immediately flips around and does exactly that, spinning over itself as it fires behind them at the same time Yeonjun powers The Ursa Minor up and away.

The Horangie flies low above them as they streak off from the outpost, and Kai tilts his head back as an explosion shatters the air around them. Multiple shots are bouncing off the large ship’s shields, rebounding back into the clouds and reacting with whatever chemicals they’re formed from. The sparks aren’t big, but they’re loud, and they crackle the coms enough that Kai can no longer make out Mingyu’s shrieks. The Goyangi is a force all its own, the way it maneuvers in their wake a testament to its pilot’s prowess. Kai can see the Panttaur’s fleet on their tails, stunned at how almost bumbling they seem as Soonyoung whips his fighter around them, twisting and turning between the other ships until a few begin to crash into each other. What ones he doesn’t manage to down in that manner, Jihoon takes care of, his shots artfully hitting wings and engines to send them careening towards the snowy ground.

“Going up,” Yeonjun says suddenly, and Kai doesn’t know if the warning is meant for him, or the crew of The Hornagie above them. “Hang on.”

Kai squeezes his eyes shut as The Ursa Minor all but flips over itself, the cabin briefly parallel to the planet’s surface before Yeonjun hits the boosters and sends them blasting towards the breaking point of the atmosphere. For a moment, Kai thinks the move has killed them, a horrified noise gurgling in his throat as he watches some of the remaining fighters follow in their wake now that they’re free of The Horangie’s shadow. But then he spots how the bigger ship’s shields are visibly flickering, and he knows Yeonjun made the right call. His hands grip the turret sticks.

“Deep breath, sweetheart,” Yeonjun says in his ear, heedless of the fact that Kai doesn’t have the capability to do any such thing. “You and me, okay? *You and me.*”

He’s echoing *him,* Kai realizes, his mind swimming back to that awful day on the bridge of The Endolphin that had sealed his fate. That’s what *he* said, when he’d been so certain that the two of them wouldn’t make it out with Beomgyu alive. Now, though, Yeonjun utters it like a promise, says it as though doing so will give them the luck they need to survive this. And hell, maybe it will. In one way or another, they’ve both already made it this far.

Kai turns his head, waiting for The Ursa Minor’s sensors to follow the movement until he can see the two fighters that have peeled off from the pack to chase them. The Goyangi is still

below, doing its best to take out the remainder of the fleet, but it will never catch up in time once it does. His hands are shaking around the turret controls, and Kai steadies himself, his teeth digging into his lower lip hard enough to sting. At this range, he's not sure he can hit them, his aim too untested. He can hear Yeonjun breathing, the pace of his inhales and exhales spiking the closer the fighters get. Their shields are up, Kai can tell, the sheen of sunlight reflecting off them, which means he can't take out the wings directly. He'll have to go for the engines, he'll have to wait until they're about to break the atmosphere, and their angle is steep enough that he can hit them.

"Kai-ya," Yeonjun intones unsteadily.

"Give me a second."

Blaster fire wizzes past them, narrowly missing one of The Ursa Minor's wings as Yeonjun curses. "Kai-ya!"

And there's the angle. The Ursa Minor rockets through the atmosphere, and Kai locks his aim on the fighter that's closer on their heels. He fires, flinching as the shot hits the engine dead center. The fighter stalls, hanging suspended for a moment, before it begins its downward deathroll back towards the ground, taking the other one with it in a fiery explosion.

"Fuck," Yeonjun gasps, a sentiment Kai echoes.

There's still another seven minutes until they reach where they left The Endolphin, and Kai struggles to stay conscious for every second of them. Everything still hurts, the pain only flaring hotter now that the fear of their untimely demise is no longer breathing down their necks. He slumps in his seat, one eye cracked open to try and stay aware enough to take up his position with the turrets again should the need arise. But Yeonjun has hit the throttle, and any further Panttaur persistence doesn't seem able to follow. Their coms have gone quiet, now out of range of The Horangie and The Goyangi both, and still just far enough from The Endolphin to make contact too risky. He's thrown their shields into full power, Kai notes distantly, leaving them fully cloaked as they navigate back home.

The stick that caused this is jammed under the pilot's side of the console, seemingly disarmed if the way it's no longer pulsing with unknown energy is anything to go by. Kai stares at it through the feed of his visor, noting with quiet dismay that the symbols on the grip at its center are not Panttaur, but Gigye. He wonders if he should tell Yeonjun that he might *actually* be dying this time.

The coms buzz in his ear, a high whine of a reaching signal making him groan before Taehyun's voice shouts, "What *the fuck* do you two have aboard with you!? You're lit up like a fucking beacon on the radar!"

"Good evening to you too," Yeonjun hums. "And I don't know what you're talking about. We picked up a weird Panttaur weapon, but-"

"Gigye," Kai corrects weakly.

Yeonjun pauses, ". . . A weird *Gigye* weapon," he amends. "Kai-ya is . . . Not doing so well, in case you can't tell."

"What happened?" Soobin's voice is stiff, demanding, but Kai can hear how it cracks at the end.

"We can explain when we're aboard," Yeonjun starts. "Kai-ya needs to-"

"It's Kai," Taehyun chokes out suddenly. Kai flinches. "It's *Kai.* Look at the radar. The energy reading, it's too big to be a handheld weapon of any kind."

"What are you talking about?" Yeonjun snaps.

"What were you hit with?" Taehyun asks, a question neither of them can answer. Yeonjun reaches behind him with a hand, gripping Kai's shoulder until Kai whines under the pressure of his hand. "Did it get you in the chest?"

"Yeah," Kai gasps.

Why that matters, he doesn't know, and Kai manages a weak, stuttered apology before his vision flickers again, and then goes dark.

Everything hurts.

Chapter End Notes

:3c

Please leave a comment if you enjoyed the chapter! Or if you're just really mad at me for yeeting y'all off a cliff again. You can also follow me on twitter @cat_macbeth for WIPS, and @kari_threadfics for twitter threadfics!

Chapter 6: Six

Chapter Summary

"I don't know what to do," Kai whispers, and his voice is hoarse, trembling even in the depths of his own head. "I- I don't know what to do."

He can't move forward without looking over his shoulder. He can't chart the stars without knowing what galaxies he's already tread. There's too much behind him, and nothing tangible enough ahead for him to say, with absolute surety, that she's right.

Maybe his memories don't make him who he is, but without them, Kai has no idea what does.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long. Life and stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a hand on his cheek.

Kai has been here before.

Almost immediately he recognizes that it's not just one. He knows these hands, the minute differences in scale and size, weight and breadth. They comb through his hair, settle along the line of his jaw, heavy palms and long fingers, thin wrists and softly hesitant touches. He knows these hands better than he knows himself, warm and solid and there, lifelines and heartlines he's traced out so often he could redraw them on his own skin with his eyes closed.

Gravity. That's what it's like, Kai thinks distantly, the muddled thoughts bogged down in the cobwebbed corners of his mind. He's unconscious -*no*- shut down. That's right. The outpost. The Ursa Minor. Pain. Gravity keeps him grounded, draws him back, gentle hands and murmured affections. He can feel a thumb soothing over his cheek, urging him home. "Come on, Kai-ya."

"Come on, Kai-ya."

Yeonjun doesn't look at him, his tablet clutched tight and held close to his chest, as if he can somehow pretend Kai hasn't already seen it.

Kai can't breathe, his heart in his throat and his lungs full of cold, clawing grief. Not like this. ***Not like this.*** *"Hyung . . ."*

His hands clench around the tablet, and Yeonjun looks away. "You know I was flunking my tests on purpose," he whispers, and Kai can hear how hoarse his voice is, how strained. "And the instructors knew that, too. But they can't afford to keep holding me back, I should have been assigned to a ship already, and I- The Butterfly is ***gone****, Kai-ya."*

He says it like that means something, like at the end of the day the loss of The Butterfly is the be all, end all of what will determine the course of their lives. But they're more than that, Kai knows. They can be so much more than a shadow of what The Butterfly left behind. He lunges forwards, knocking the tablet out of Yeonjun's grip. It clatters on the cold tiles of the dorm room floor, the screen cracking over the missive Kai's already seen too much of, orders declaring that Yeonjun has to leave Meon Jigu in full uniform in two months time. Too soon. So wrong. "No," Kai snaps, grabbing a fistful of the other boy's sleep shirt to force Yeonjun to meet his eyes. Instinctively, Yeonjun's hands rise to grasp at his wrist, his fingers, his gaze wide and startled when it meets Kai's. He doesn't know what else to say, other than that tired, vehement denial. At the end of the day, what can he do? He's only sixteen, barely old enough to even be considered as a potential crew member. No one in their right mind would give him a ship, they'll be lucky if two of them end up with the same orders, let alone all five. There's nothing he can do.

Unless . . .

"There's an old Gigye scouting vessel . . ."

Further. Kai grasps through the shadows of his mind for the torn edge of thread, cherry-red like Yeonjun's hair, and trips after it.

"Does it hurt?"

Taehyun's voice doesn't waver when he speaks, but Kai can see that's only through sheer force of will. The tightness of his frown gives it away, as does the tremble that doesn't travel any higher than his knees. His hands are steady where he's carefully cleaning the nasty blaster burn that's cut a shallow path up the inside of Yeonjun's forearm. Kai knows just enough about biology to be aware of how dangerously close the wound was to being so much worse. As it is it's still a mess, blood and blackened skin. It's going to leave a scar, something he foolishly notes aloud while Taehyun sucks in a heavy breath through his nose, pausing as he's stitching closed the highest section, where it's too deep to seam back together on its own.

"I'm sorry," Taehyun whispers.

Yeonjun cocks a smile, all teeth, not a hint of pain in the reassuring expression. "Why are you sorry, Taehyunie? You're doing great. I'll be good as new in no time."

It's a rather cruel irony, Kai thinks as he stares at the bloodied sleeve Taehyun had to cut off earlier, that the first field test of his skills as a medic ended up being performed on his best friend.

Taehyun finishes the stitches, and Yeonjun twists his arm around to loudly marvel to the observing adults about the neat, professional quality of them. The rest of the wound is wrapped in gauze, and once Yeonjun has quieted down again, Taehyun is able to give him a bag of fresh rolls and instructions on how to keep it all clean. The attendants breathing down their necks look pleased as they steer Yeonjun out of the exam room to finish his post-incident paperwork.

The door has barely closed behind them when Taehyun sways on his feet. Kai's more than close enough to catch him, one arm around Taehyun's back as he fumbles to take one of his hands with the other. Taehyun blinks up at the ceiling, and he shudders as his fingers clench around Kai's hard enough to hurt. "I don't want to do this," he chokes out, tears welling over an unfocused gaze. "That was ***awful****. I was- I was* ***hurting*** *him and I-"*

"You weren't," Kai reassures. "He would have told you. You were so good, Taehyun-ah."

Taehyun hiccups, and Kai doesn't protest when he stumbles to his feet again only just long enough to throw his arms around Kai's shoulders, bury his face against Kai's neck. "I ***can't****, Kai-ya! I hate it! I never wanted-"*

He bites back on the tail ends of that confession, muffling it beneath a sob instead, and Kai wilts. It doesn't matter. It never has. The things they wanted, the things they could have done if the Gigye had never taken everything . . . Thinking about all those "what ifs" only serves to hurt them. Even at just fourteen, the courses of their lives are already all planned out. It doesn't matter what they want.

"You were so good," Kai repeats, the same way Taehyun had reassured him a month ago, when Kai had barely managed to impress his instructors by reprogramming a small, Gigye drone, his hands mapping out the knobs of Taehyun's trembling spine. "You did so well, Taehyun-ah."

Further. This time Kai tugs, stumbling forward to where the tangled thread leads, drawn onward by the pull at the other end.

"You're a wimp," Beomgyu says. His tone is steely even when it cracks in the middle, but his expression doesn't match it. Despite his stiff shoulders, narrowed eyes and furrowed brows, Kai can see the way his lower lip quivers.

Taehyun glares at him and stiffly folds his arms over his chest before he looks away. "If you want to end up getting held back another year, that's on you," he snaps. "But if I skip one more test I'll end up getting placed in the Away classes!"

It's the wrong thing to say, Kai thinks glumly as he watches Beomgyu's entire face fall, but it's way too late for Taehyun to take it back. Truthfully, Kai's not even sure if he wants to. Beomgyu swallows, the visceral hurt in his gaze shuttering as he says, "You know they assign nerds to ships too, right?"

That, of course, only serves to make everything worse.

Taehyun sucks in a heavy breath, his eyes fixed on the cold tiles of the storage room the three of them are tucked away in. "Yeah, well, at least I have a useful skill," he hisses. His hand reaches behind him, easing the door open before he casts Beomgyu a rueful glance over his shoulder. For a moment he pauses, attention shifting to Kai, who reluctantly shakes his head. "Fine," Taehyun says, and this time the ache bleeds into his voice.

The door closes, once more encasing them in a darkness that highlights the abrupt emptiness where Taehyun had been standing only a moment before. Beomgyu stares at the back of the door for a long, heavy second, silent save for the shallow, wet sounds of his inhales and exhales. After a beat of hesitation, Kai reaches out to touch his elbow at the same time Beomgyu shifts to hug his arms around himself. "He didn't mean that," Kai tries softly.

"Yes he did," Beomgyu mutters. "And he's right. All the idiots get put into the Away classes, and end up assigned Pilot or Marksman positions because that's the only thing they're good for; being bodies for the Gigye's chopping block."

Something twists in Kai's chest, awful and sharp. "That's not true."

It is, though. He knows it is, deep down. Soobin and Yeonjun are in the Away classes, and they've said the same things.

Beomgyu shrugs off his touch and takes a step back until his shoulders hit a cluttered shelf, and he sinks down towards the floor. Kai kneels beside him, staying close even as Beomgyu pulls his legs up towards his chest and thunks his forehead down against the curve of his knees. "How old do you think we'll be," Beomgyu whispers, barely audible, "when we die?"

*That painful, clawed thing finds a deep, **deep** purchase around Kai's rattling heart. "I don't know," he replies, too honest. Beomgyu chokes on a strangled little sound. "Does it matter? I just . . . When we do, I just don't wanna be alone."*

Beomgyu's shaking, his stilted breaths heaving into muffled sobs, and Kai doesn't know what to do. He fumbles for where he dropped his backpack earlier, unsteady fingers finding the zipper and pulling until he can reach a hand inside. When he pushes the plush against Beomgyu's cheek the other boy lifts his head to stare at him like he's lost his goddamn mind. "Did you seriously bring that to class?"

Kai scowls and takes one of the toy's flippers in hand, using it to wipe away the tears on Beomgyu's face one at a time. "I always bring Endolphin to class. She's good luck," he mumbles, frowning further when Beomgyu's nose scrunches up like he's trying his hardest not to laugh. "Besides, it got you to stop crying."

"I wasn't crying," Beomgyu denies instantly, vehement despite the fact that there are still tears clinging to his lashes.

"Oh," Kai scoffs. "I guess your eyes were just sweating, then."

"They were. It's a horrible medical condition." He pauses, the tense slope of his back easing until his shoulders droop low enough for him to rest his chin on his knees. "Hey, Huening-

ah," he murmurs through the shadows of the cramped storage room, "you should probably go too. A smart kid like you might get lucky. Maybe they'll keep you on Meon Jigu."

It's not the first time Kai's heard such a statement. His sunbae had said something similar the first time Kai had shown off his test scores, ruffling his hair and dropping the comment as if it was a gift Kai should be thankful for. If the man had noticed the way Soobin's face had paled, he hadn't cared, nor had he listened when Kai had mumbled about how that wasn't what he wanted. But that's what most adults are like, Kai knows now, worn down and weary, cogs in the machine of a war that's driven their entire lives.

"I don't want to stay here," Kai says on an exhale. Beomgyu blinks at him. "Wh-when I take my placement tests, I- I'm going to tell them-"

"You don't have to decide yet," Beomgyu interrupts, sounding stricken for reasons Kai won't quite be able to define for awhile yet. "You're not- they won't place you until you're twelve at the youngest. You have a few months, Huening-ah, you-"

*"**I don't want to stay here**," Kai repeats, forceful enough that Beomgyu clams up. "I want to go where Soobin-ah goes. Where Yeonjun-hyung goes. Where Taehyun-ah goes. Where **you** go."*

Further. The thread is thinner now, and Kai cradles the spools of it twisting around his palms as carefully as he can as he follows it through the dark, back and back and back.

"Kai-ya," Yoongi scolds, the hand on Kai's shoulder too tight as he pushes at him until Kai has no choice but to let go of the lapels of Soobin's new uniform. "He's going to be fine. It's just school. You'll be going too in a few years."

*It's not fine, Kai knows. **It's not fine**. Soobin is **ten**, but they've already dressed him up in his first fatigues, cold navy blues and chilled steel greys that make him look that much more pale, his wide, scared brown eyes the only color left in his face. Beside him, Beomgyu isn't faring any better, the stiff buttons comically big on his smaller frame. His hands are white knuckled where he's fisted them into one of Soobin's sleeves. His birthday was only two days ago, Kai thinks wildly, hysterically, an occasion that should have been happy soured instead by the looming thought of today.*

In just eleven months, Taehyun will be ten, too, and then Kai will be alone.

"Can't you see him off nicely?" Yoongi chastises softly. "Be a big boy, Kai-ya. Don't cry. Tell Soobin-ah goodbye." He keeps him at an arm's length, strictly making sure Kai can't lunge forward and grab hold of Soobin again in the same manner he had the second he'd emerged from their shared room in that awful uniform. Behind him, Kim Taehyung stares down at the scene, one eyebrow arched and his gaze shuttered and distant, the same expression he's worn ever since he arrived with Beomgyu to take Soobin away. When Kai doesn't reply, Yoongi just shakes his head. "Alright. We can talk about it later," he sighs. "Soobin-ah, let's-"

"It's not fair!" Kai yells.

Everyone in the room jumps, and Yoongi's so startled that the grip keeping Kai at bay falters enough for the boy to break it, tripping forward and into Soobin's waiting arms. Kai wails, hiccupping on harsh, sharp and upset sobs as he clings to Soobin for all he's worth. It's not fair. Soobin is ***ten****, he should be with Kai, running around on a playground under a wide blue sky, not being shuffled off to train for war. He howls when Yoongi snags a hand in the back of his shirt, trying to seperate them. It's a move that only makes Kai scream louder, feet kicking wildly as he desperately tries to stay where he is.*

They can't go back. There is no more blue sky, no playgrounds, no families, no Earth. All Kai has is Soobin, and they're ***taking him away****.*

"Call Kookie," Yoongi mutters as he finally manages to pry Kai and Soobin apart, heedless of how Soobin too is now in tears, Beomgyu also sniffling where he's wrapped himself bodily around the taller boy's arm. Kai wails, flailing and twisting in Yoongi's stern hold as he's lifted from the floor and carted off towards his room. "Maybe Kai-ya will settle down if Taehyun-ah is here. Go ahead and take the boys," he tells Taehyung over his shoulder. "Tell the rest of The Butterfly I'll be a bit late."

Taehyung snorts but doesn't protest, and the last thing Kai sees before his bedroom door shuts is the man rolling his eyes.

Kai lashes out as he's set down on the bed, a closed fist landing hard on one of Yoongi's cheeks. The impact hurts, vibrating up his arm and shocking him silent as the pain radiates from knuckles to shoulder, and his teeth clack down around his tongue, tinging his mouth with the taste of copper.

Yoongi barely flinches as he kneels next to the mattress. He takes the hand that struck him between both of his, a tiny frown marring his features as he unfolds Kai's fingers to look at where the skin split across the knuckles, tsking under his breath. "That hurt, didn't it," he says, and Kai sucks in a startled breath at the softness of his tone. "Word from the wise, don't tuck your thumb into your palm when you punch people. That's a good way to mess up your hand."

He stands again, Kai watching with round eyes while he crosses the room to the closet and pulls down the first aid kit from the top shelf. The box is balanced on his knees as he sits in front of Kai again, and when he holds out a hand for Kai's, Kai doesn't hesitate to give it, silent, fat tears continuing to roll down his cheeks.

The antiseptic stings where it's dabbed gently over his knuckles, and Yoongi is deathly quiet as he winds the gauze around Kai's hand. "Did you bite your tongue?" he asks, a thumb pressed to Kai's chin. Kai nods, to which Yoongi repeats his low tsking noise. This time, Kai doesn't miss the heavy resignation in it. "Alright. Stay here for a minute, okay? I'll get you some ice."

He's back as quick as he promised he would be, a few ice cubes held in a little plastic bag. Kai opens his mouth when he's offered one, and closes it again around the cube as Yoongi moves to perch on the edge of the mattress beside him. "You know none of us want to do this, right?"

Kai's hands fist at the blankets beneath him. "I hate you," he hiccups.

Yoongi blinks down at him, an expression on his face that Kai can't read. In a vicious manner only an eight year old can muster, he'd hoped to see the words have some kind of effect, but Yoongi's face gives nothing away. He's just like the rest of them, Kai realizes, too tired to care. Soon, he fears, Soobin will be the same. He lifts a hand, and Kai doesn't flinch back from it as the man's palm cups around his cheek for a heartbeat before it cards through his hair. "Jungkook-ah will be here soon," he says, inflectionless. "Try and behave for him, please?"

Further. Kai's terrified the thread will snap, the draw of it tight and shaking where he clutches at the bits he's already gathered up. But he's so close, and he can't stop now. He keeps going.

Two pairs of hands, so small, shuffle through thick patches of clover dotting the grass. Soobin's fingers brush against his on every other pass, and Kai grins, giggling as he tangles their pinkies together and halts the other boy's progress.

Soobin pauses, his breeze blustered bangs swept aside as he glares at Kai. "Stop! I want to find one before Eomma gets mad at me for being late!"

"We're already late," Kai reminds with another laugh. Molangie sits nearby in the grass, stained with green fingerprints where it's nestled between their backpacks. It must be almost dinner time by now, but Kai doesn't care, engrossed in Soobin's latest hare-brained idea he got from a book at the school library. Behind them the playground is almost empty, children being ushered home by their parents as the sun glows low on the horizon. "How many leaves is it s'posed to have?" Kai asks as he plucks yet another clover free from the bunch, studying it in the stretched blue hour shadows.

"Four," Soobins states primly. "And if we find one, a rainbow will appear."

Kai's pretty sure that's not how rainbows work, but he refrains from saying so. He might be wrong, Soobin is older afterall, maybe he knows something Kai doesn't. At the very least the idea is nice, a sweet reprieve from the bustle that usually consumes them on their way back from school, steps urged faster by the sharp warnings of nervous parents who can't seem to stop watching the news. "Do you think magic is real?" Kai asks absently as he combs through the clovers again.

Soobin hums on a contemplative note. "Mm, I don't know. I guess. Do you mean, like, Disney stuff?"

"Yeah."

For some reason that makes Soobin snort. "Then no. Did you know that in the book, the little mermaid ***dies****?"*

Kai jerks his head up, staring at him as his jaw drops. "What!?"

"Yeah. The prince doesn't kiss her, so she turns into seafoam."

*“That’s **awful**,” Kai gasps. “That’s not magic, that’s just- just **sad**.”*

Soobin shrugs. “It would have been magic if he’d kissed her though, because the kiss could save her. The deal was that if he loved her, a kiss would make her human. But he didn’t so-” he wiggles his hands in Kai’s face, “-poof! Seafoam. Oh!”

Kai watches as he dives forwards, grasping small fingers around the stem of a clover he’s spotted. “Look!” he gasps as he plucks it free from its fellows. “Look! Look! I found one! Four leaves!”

The wind whips up, making Kai shiver as the sunset light dims. For a moment his attention stays on Soobin, a grin tugging at his lips when the other boy sits up to show off his find. “That’s so-”

*It’s then that Soobin’s free hand darts out, clenching painfully tight around one of Kai’s where it sits in the grass between them. His eyes are wide as they drift towards the sky. Kai tilts his head back to follow his gaze in the direction of the horizon line. “Kai,” Soobin whispers, and Kai has never heard his voice sound like that before, so quiet, trembling, **scared**. His hand squeezes Kai’s, the clover falling from his grasp to become lost in the same place it was found as he fumbles to grab his other one too. “**Kai**.”*

Kai stares, unable to look away as the sun flickers between the trees, once, twice, and then goes out, plunging the world around them into darkness.

The thread vanishes from where Kai’s tangled it around his hands, disintegrating between his fingers as if it was never anything more than wishful thinking. Kai tries to keep ahold of it, but it slips away, disappearing ever faster the more he tries to grasp at the remains. It's all he has though, he thinks desperately, anguish clogging up his throat. *It's all he has.*

His hands fumble through the dark, searching, searching, but only coming back clutching at nothing. It's gone. It's gone, it's gone, it's gone it's-

"Kai-ya."

Maybe there's a bit of it left inside him. That's where it came from after all, right? Maybe there's some remaining and he can find the strands, pull until there's enough of it to take hold of again, one little unraveled piece at a time. There has to be, he needs-

"Kai-ya."

Destitute hands find his chest, fingers curling into claws that have nothing to tear at because, that's right, Kai doesn’t have a body anymore. Even if he weren't trapped inside his own head, the cage that binds him isn't his by definition. It just looks like him, a human form in philosophy only. Which means there is no thread, is there. Because Kai doesn’t have a heart to bind it to any longer, and-

"Kai-ya."

Light swirls in front of him, a ghostly beacon in the darkness, causing Kai to still as it casts him aglow. Somehow he's always startled when he's granted a chance to see Endolphin at her full, lifelike size, whether that be within the halls of a Gigye base or here in the empty, cold confines of himself. Reaching out for her is instinctual, even though he doesn't remember that he can actually touch her now until his hands settles solidly on the glittering flecks of her shape. To his surprise though she doesn't let him linger, darting away from him almost as soon as he makes contact. Kai follows her with his eyes, heart in his throat as she drifts back.

"Kai-ya," she says, and her tone makes Kai's brows furrow, the almost scolding tinge so much different than the usual happy chirps and whistles she normally speaks to him with. "What are you doing?"

Glancing around him, Kai's dismayed to find the answer isn't as obvious as it feels. The thread is long gone now, lost somewhere in the midst of all those walled-off, shadowed places. He swallows, anguish prickling at the corners of his vision as he fumbles a hand through the darkness, his fingers clutching around nothing. "I don't know," he whispers. "I just . . . I wanted . . ."

"You're hurting yourself."

Kai jolts, something twisting inside him as he slowly lifts his head to look at her again. "No, I-"

He can't read Endolphin's expression, although whether that's simply because her inhuman features don't allow for such visible emotion or not, Kai can't tell. She tilts her chin up, her tail swishing in slow back and forth waves as if she needs the movement to stay afloat within the boundaries of his mind. "Kai-ya," she says, and again the tone is too close to a reprimand for Kai to overlook.

"They're mine," Kai snaps. "My memories. Why shouldn't I-"

Endolphin cocks her head, one fin flipping restlessly against her side while Kai speaks. Again, she cuts him off. "Did they make you happy?"

Usually, the direct, simplistic way that Endolphin expresses herself is a comfort. It implies she doesn't, or can't, overthink things. It suggests that the fraught emotions that plague Kai aren't something that will ever find a home in her, too. Now, though, it gives Kai pause.

The easiness of the question leaves too much open for interpretation.

And he's pretty sure that's the point.

She must take his confused silence for an answer, because Endolphin flicks her tail his way and fills the silence with a crisp, "They didn't."

Sometimes, Kai's sure the only reason humanity has survived this long is sheer stubbornness. The dismissive manner with which she assumes that immediately makes him dig his heels in, biting his cheek through a rush of vicious denial. What does it matter if the memories he clawed back to himself made him happy? "I-"

“Were any of them good?”

Once more, her blunt inquiry makes Kai snap his mouth shut. He stares at her. “They’re still mine,” he says after a heavy, viscous moment. “I still want them.”

“Do you?” Endolphin asks. “Is this-” she flips her tail from one side to the other, a gesture at the empty, stagnant darkness around them, “-worth it?”

Kai's attention follows the swing of her tail, back and forth, up and down as she indicates the void. There’s nothing to see, but Kai can feel it regardless, a hollow ache in his chest that hasn't been filled in quite right, the pieces he's dug up to try and soothe it only serving to leave him that much more sore. But still . . . "I-" He starts, falters as the confession trips over the lump in his throat. "They . . . They're still part of me, though. Those things, they made me . . . *Me.*"

Endolphin blinks, long and slow and disbelieving. "Did they?"

His lips purse. This isn't cute anymore, or funny. Now he's just annoyed. "*Yes,* I-"

"Are you less *you* now without them?"

Something awful squeezes around Kai’s heart, or whatever he has now that passes for one, an incorporeal memory of a pulse in the recesses of his mind. He doesn’t answer her, but he doesn’t think he needs to, either, his stricken silence says enough.

Yes.

No.

Maybe.

She's not the first to ask him this, though, is she. Someone else already has, and the echo of Yeonjun’s murmured plea clogs up Kai’s throat.

"I don't know what to do," Kai whispers, and his voice is hoarse, trembling even in the depths of his own head. "I- I don't know what to *do.*"

He can't move forward without looking over his shoulder. He can’t chart the stars without knowing what galaxies he's already tread. There’s too much behind him, and nothing tangible enough ahead for him to say, with absolute surety, that she’s right.

Maybe his memories don't make him who he is, but without them, Kai has no idea what *does.*

Instinctively, almost wildly, he moves to fist his hands into his hair, the backdraft of a breath he no longer needs rattling through him, but he can’t move his arm. Something’s holding it down, a pressure curled around his right palm, warm, heavy, grounding. Kai jolts, and his startled eyes find the glow of Endolphin in the darkness.

"What . . ."

"Time to wake up."

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Kai returns to himself all at once.

Before it always happened gradually, stretched out minutes slowly tugging him into full consciousness, like the systems of a long dormant ship rebooting. This time though he jolts, spasming as his awareness slams back into his waking body. A strangled, hoarse noise escapes him, the bright lights overhead too blinding for him to make out where he is. Instinctively, Kai tries to roll onto his side, eyes fluttering shut again as his sense of orientation wobbles dangerously. He shudders as something stops him halfway, a firm touch to his shoulder that's accompanied by a hissing inhale.

"Flaring again," someone says, and Kai winces as he recognizes that sharply forced professional tone. "Time is 15:24." The hand on his shoulder tightens, easing him onto his back again. "No prolonged seizing, temperature stabilized, Gy output: seven."

Kai's stomach sinks. "Taehyun-ah-"

The palm on him tenses, and it's only then that Kai realizes that Taehyun's other hand is clutching one of his, holding on tight. "*Kai.*"

Panic claws at Kai's insides, rattling through the metal cage of his ribs. Taehyun shouldn't be touching him, not if he has a fucking *Gy output.* Logically, though, Taehyun knows that. And he's doing it anyways. "Taehyun-ah," Kai tries again, only to falter around the trip of the syllables as another harsh shudder wracks through him.

The fingers curled around his squeeze. "Stay with me, Kai-ya."

He doesn't know how to, Kai thinks with rising dismay. His vision is flickering whenever he tries to open his eyes. Every other second seems to draw another violent ripple through him. There's no breath to steady himself with, and his thoughts are too dazed to focus, thrown askew by the now unfamiliar sensation of pain. More than anything, Kai's desperate to break all points of contact, a thought that has him tugging at the hand Taehyun's holding. It's a fruitless effort. Taehyun doesn't let go, the action only making him clutch Kai's fingers in his that much tighter. He's tempted to shove the other man, put the necessary space between them, but that likely won't do much more than inflict *another* radiation burn on him, and that's the last thing Kai wants.

The hand that had urged him into laying flat again reaches to soothe through his hair instead. Kai stills as the sensation registers. It's so gentle, a careful, light carding of fingers from his bangs to the back of his head, but it's there.

And he *feels it.*

The touch shocks through him, overwhelming for a moment as Kai realizes he can feel Taehyun's fingers around his own, too, the brush of a thumb across his knuckles. He stops
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trembling, the tense agony drowned out beneath everything else as the warmth sinks into his synthetic skin.

It starts to fade almost as soon as it's acknowledged, the weight of the hands on him dulling in shallow thrums as the pain too starts to ebb. Kai chases after it, thoughtlessly reaching to try and drag Taehyun closer to him with his free hand only to realize his mistake when Taehyun sucks in a hitched breath through his teeth.

Kai opens his eyes, stricken as he's met with the pink outline of his own palm on Taehyun's arm.

Taehyun barely even flinches back, most of his attention still on where he's gripping Kai's other hand in his. "Flare waning," he mutters. "Time is 15:29. Gy output: six." There's a screen to his left, and the medical officer's eyes find it, watching the readings that Kai can't make heads or tails of with the way his head is still spinning. He spots the shimmering form of Endolphin beside it though, swimming in small, agitated circles between Taehyun and the screen. That's right, Endolphin. The Endolphin. Kai lets his eyes slide shut again, straining to hear the low, steady hum of the ship's engines. "Gy output: five."

The pain washes out of him, slipping away in waves and taking that fleeting comfort of touch with it.

"Gy output: four."

He has to let it go, Kai knows, but the effort it takes to do so, the conscious knowledge that he might never get it back forces a wretched, anguished sound from his lips. Taehyun squeezes his hand, and Kai relishes in the decrescent feeling even as it finally drains away entirely.

"Gy output: three."

It's the chill that gets him, Kai thinks miserably as the room tilts back into focus when he blinks his eyes open. Or, perhaps more accurately, the lack of warmth. He can't discern either anymore, so it's the absence in the space where he'd held it only moments prior that leaves him achingly hollow.

"Gy output: two."

It's only by sight that he can tell Taehyun is carding through his hair again, the movement of his arm in the peripherals of Kai's still flickering vision. This time, the tremble that courses through him is wrought of a different kind of agony. Kai turns his head away, unobstructed this time when he rolls onto his side and presses his face into the thin medbay pillow.

"Gy output: two."

Life, Kai knows, has never been kind to him. But this seems especially cruel, that brief taste of what he once was lingering now in every inhuman atom of him, an echo of a person that he no longer really is. The dull thrum of The Endolphin's engines pulses in one ear and out the other.

“Gy Output: one.”

“Taehyun-ah,” Kai whispers. “*Taehyun-ah.*”

Grief, as always, settles inside him in a different shape each time it strikes. Kai clutches at Taehyun’s hand, and feels nothing.

“Stable.”

Taehyun heaves out a sigh as soon as the declaration leaves his lungs, the fingers in Kai’s hair falling away, knuckles soothing over the back of Kai’s neck and down the line of his jaw until he presses a thumb to Kai’s chin and draws his gaze up. He stares down at him for a long second, furrowed brows and tired eyes roving over his face one little bit at a time until he seems to find whatever he was looking for. His shoulders slump. “You can’t keep doing this to me,” he murmurs.

Kai thinks the admonishment is meant to sound teasing, light, but it falls so flat it’s almost comical. In reality, Taehyun just seems *exhausted,* the tenor of his voice so scared and sore at the edges even with the lilted attempt at humor that Kai has to bite back against a gasp that’s too close to a sob. He wants to apologize, but the words don’t come, stuck behind a renewed well of anguish. So instead he turns away again, letting go of Taehyun’s hand to draw the pillow close and bury his face in it once more. One of the machines he’s hooked to beeps, a distant annoyance that Kai tunes out as soon as it filters into his mind.

“You’ve been in and out for three days,” Taehyun says, strict professionalism bleeding in the air again. “This is the first time you’ve actually responded to your name.”

At this point, Kai can’t bring himself to mourn more lost time, the knowledge that he’s made up of only six scant years already too much to bear without missing a matter of days. What he can regret, however, is this. “I hurt you.”

He tilts his head to the side, just far enough to crack an eye open and watch as Taehyun lifts a tentative touch to the branded imprint of Kai’s hand on his opposite forearm. “This? It’ll go away in a week or so.”

“You shouldn’t have let me back on the ship,” Kai accuses lowly, frustrated by the nonchalant dismissal. “Why the hell would you bring me aboard if I’m *radioactive?*”

He’s surprised by the viciousness of the glare Taehyun levels him with. “Kai-ya. You’ve been radioactive this whole time.”

Wait. What?

The hand that settles on his shoulder is firm, and despite the way Kai resists, Taehyun easily pushes him onto his back across the medbay bed. They didn’t bother to dress him in a flimsy hospital gown this time, and Kai grimaces as Taehyun splays the same hand on his bare chest, right over that unscarred center space where the weapon had struck him, the tips of his fingers brushing across where he might have once traced out the thunder of Kai’s heart. “If

you'd bothered to look over that diagram I made of your body, you would have known that," Taehyun scolds. "You're powered by nuclear fusion, Kai-ya."

Well that's just fucking *swell.*

Kai opens his mouth to protest, anger curling tight and tangled in his throat, but he swallows it down when Taehyun says crisply, "It's no worse than a sunburn, you know."

Oh.

". . . It isn't?"

Taehyun shifts closer, his arm held out so Kai can see the mark he's left. "Look, it's barely even pink. At your hottest your contact radiation was only at about sixteen Gy, that's not enough to go any deeper than a couple layers of skin. You wouldn't be functional if you were a walking nuclear bomb."

Kai squints at him, "But . . . The energy reading you saw on the radar . . ."

"That was a contained signal," Taehyun hums. "You weren't leaking energy, or anything. It was just trapped inside your body. The reason it was so visible was because it was flowing through you, rather than staying here," he taps a finger over the left side of Kai's chest. "Basically, from what I can figure out, that thing caused your power source to surge. It runs on the same stuff, so being hit with it made your core flare, and you overheated."

That doesn't sound right. "Why would the Gigye make something that could hurt them like that?" Kai asks, incredulous and confused even though he knows very well that Taehyun won't have an answer for him.

And he's right, of course, because Taehyun's only response is a soft, "Kai-ya. You're not a Gigye."

It's a statement that feels both true and false at the same time, a white lie and a gentle reminder twined together. He's not a Gigye, or even a footsoldier cyborg, but he isn't human, either. Maybe, though, that's the point. "I'm unstable."

"Uh-"

"*Physically,*" Kai clarifies. "I'm not- they didn't *finish* me. This isn't a flaw, it's a weakness they didn't get a chance to patch because I'm *not done.* "

He knows all too well what a dead cyborg looks like, or a dead Gigye. They're not pulsating with untethered energy. They go down heavy, cold, whatever is powering them contained in all the right places, the exact opposite of what keeps happening to Kai. He's incomplete. He's a *mistake.*

And, despite Taehyun's reassurances, he's probably dangerous by being so.

Again, he wants to protest, furious for a moment at everyone for deciding this was a risk worth taking. But the festering emotion leaves him as quickly as it arrived, quelled by the

ache of knowing he'd make all the same decisions were it one of them instead.

Beneath the too-bright overhead lights of the medbay, Kai sits up. There's no warmth when he presses the heel of a hand to his chest, no discernable whir or pulse to betray the presence of that displaced energy. Then again, he probably wouldn't be able to tell even if there was. He can feel Taehyun's eyes on him, quiet, somber contemplation in the air between them, but Kai can't think of anything to say that would dispel it. Telling Taehyun what he felt, however brief, seems like a sick thing to do, a useless spark of hope that, quite likely, won't manifest into anything more. It's bad enough that Kai knows, really, the terrible burden of having had that fleeting taste already so heavy in his chest that, were he capable, he would probably cry. He can't, though, and in the absence of tears the silence merely lingers on.

That too, he figures, is probably an unintentional flaw, cracks in incomplete design. The Gigye and their army don't feel either pleasure or pain, and the fact that Kai had, even for a moment, is a glaring error.

"Then fix it."

The words catch Kai off guard, so simply uttered and inflectionless that it takes a moment for them to find space in his brain. He blinks, yet another instinctual motion he knows will never leave him, and turns to stare at Taehyun.

Exhaustion hasn't left the other man's gaze, but it's largely overshadowed now, drowned out by a flare of quiet determination. "Fix it," Taehyun repeats. "That's what you do, right? Finish things. Fix them. Make them better. *Fix it.*"

Oh. "You mean . . . Fix *me?*"

Taehyun nods.

For a second Kai is angry. It flares in him hot, overwhelming as his mind rushes round and round the bitter thought of how *if only* it was that simple. If only it were so easy, and Kai could just pry himself open like he did The Endolphin, hook all his wires and pieces up to the right computer and rewrite his own coding. But it's not. The way the Gigye work, the source of their power, has *always* been outside of humanity's grasp. Kai can't fix something he isn't able to understand. He doesn't know how to.

In the quiet, uncertain lull between them, Kai's pressed a palm to his chest again, an unconscious motion he doesn't realize he's even done until one of Taehyun's hands covers his. "If anyone could figure it out-" he starts.

Kai grimaces. "*Taehyunie . . .*"

"-it would be *you,*" Taehyun finishes as if Kai had never interrupted. "Kai-ya, you're so smart-"

"Taehyun-ah."

"-and so brave, and so- so *full of love.*"

“Taehyun,” Kai snaps. “Stop. What does that have to do with anything? No one’s ever solved the Gigye’s inner circle of codex. *Love* isn’t going to break that firewall, for fuck’s sake-”

This time he is mad, the bitter bite of angry anguish too painful to ignore again. He’s tempted to leave, go stalk off and hide away somewhere on the ship where he can sulk in the misery of how truly powerless he is to save himself. But he barely even manages to think it before Taehyun has a firm hand gripped around his upper arm, fingers squeezing into silicone skin so hard that Kai’s sensors ping wildly under the pressure of it. “Kai-ya,” he snaps, soft, *stern,* like Kai’s an idiot. “Love is the *one thing* that has kept you human.”

. . . What?

“What?” Kai croaks.

“Isn’t it?” This time it’s a question, Taehyun’s eyes pleading as he asks it. “It’s what kept you sane the entire time you were imprisoned, right? It’s why you woke up, too. *And* it’s- Kai-ya, isn’t that why you keep shutting down?”

Kai stares at him, lips parted and his hand clenching over the silent, left side of his chest.

“It usually happens when your emotions are running high, right? When you’re upset?”

“But that’s not . . .” Kai falters, the words heavy on the tip of his tongue, heavier still when they stay stuck inside him. Because Taehyun’s right, isn’t he.

Grief is a kind of love, too. It’s the absence and the want of it.

The noise that wells in him is unbidden, strangled and sore, and the wounded sound Taehyun answers it with when he takes Kai’s face between his hands is almost worse. “*Kai-ya,*” he murmurs, his expression stricken. “I’m sorry. *I’m sorry.* I didn’t mean to-”

Like it’s his fault.

Kai fumbles to touch him, aching as it sinks in all over again that the action doesn’t bring as much comfort as he wishes it did. If Taehyun is warm, he can’t feel it. If Taehyun is heavy when he leans into the embrace, he doesn’t know. Taehyun has a hand in his hair, an arm tucked beneath one of Kai’s as he buries his face against the cold, faux skin of his neck, and Kai can just barely make out the thrum of his heartbeat where they’re pressed together, chest to chest. “I’m sorry,” he repeats. Kai hates how audibly the unnecessary apology trembles where it’s mumbled into the crook of his shoulder. “I’m pushing you, and that’s not- a good doctor wouldn’t-”

It’s abrupt, the way Taehyun’s already hitching breaths suddenly choke too high, how his hand on Kai’s back curls its fingers against his spine as though he needs something to hang on to. The shiver that wracks through as he slumps too heavily into Kai’s arms though is what’s more alarming. “Taehyun-ah?”

Panic grips Kai like a vice, vicious even as Taehyun tries to reassure him with a hoarse, unconvincing, “I’m alright,” against his neck. The fingers at Kai’s back clench, but there’s

nothing for them to grip, no hospital gown to wrinkle or warmth to Kai's imitation skin, and the hand in his hair slips lower, clutching at the back of his neck as Kai slides off the edge of the bed to try and keep Taehyun on his feet. "G-give me a bit," Taehyun pleads weakly. "I'm fine. Give me . . . Give me just a minute."

He'd almost forgotten Endolphin was there until she swims into his line of sight, tail flipping up and down as she circles them, and Kai follows her every movement until she meets his eyes, and he nods. That's all it takes, a succinct, non-verbal command, and the light of her dissipates all at once. Kai focuses on Taehyun again, more and more alarmed by the second as Taehyun tries to straighten up and utterly fails, leaning so heavily now into the support of Kai's arms that, were he still human, would have probably sent them both crashing to the floor. "Taehyun-ah," Kai tries again, sick fear churning in him. His vision flickers; Kai squeezes his eyes shut against it. Fuck. *Fuck.* Was Taehyun wrong about the effects of his exposure? How many more people is he going to end up hurting inadvertently?

The door to the medbay hisses open, the sound beckoning Kai to shift just enough to take in the sight of a flushed, angry, *scared* Soobin striding into the room.

"What did you *do!?*"

Everything in Kai locks up, not from terror but from agony, harsh dismay clawing at him as the accusation hits home too viscerally. "I don't know, I-"

Taehyun manages to lift his head from the crook of Kai's neck, and Kai can't see his expression when he bites out a shockingly fierce, "Go back to bed, hyung."

Soobin stiffens, fists clenching at his sides. "*Taehyun-ah-*"

"M'fine," Taehyun insists despite how poorly he backs that claim up with physical proof. He tries to get his feet under him again, only to stumble into Kai once more, fumbling a hand at Kai's bare back as he barely manages to stay upright at all.

Eyes narrowing, Soobin starts to take a step forward. He freezes as he seems to remember that Kai's there, too. They stare at each other then, agonizing seconds ticking away until Soobin spins on his heels and stalks towards the door. For a moment Kai's sure he's going to leave, going to get someone else to deal with the situation, but instead he just pauses by the access panel beside the door. The code is entered in slowly, and he's stonily silent as he pulls up the logs on the screen. His arms fold over his chest, chin dipping towards his sternum as he swears under his breath. "Fuck."

Taehyun flinches at the sound, to which Kai lets out a startled, concerned noise when he attempts to put some space between them and only manages to lose his footing again, slipping on the tiles and back against Kai.

Soobin whips back around at the soft commotion. This time his tone is more admonishing than worried. "*Taehyun-ah,* have you seriously not left this room in *five days?*"

Stubbornly, Taehyun doesn't answer. A telling silence rings through the room as he presses his face into Kai's shoulder. Kai's eyes meet Soobin's briefly before the captain darts his gaze

away, posture now stiffer than ever. “Five *days?*” Kai croaks, horrified.

“I’m *fine,*” Taehyun mutters into his shoulder, sounding so distinctly not fine that Kai tightens his arms around him entirely on instinct. “I’m just . . . Just tired.”

The words are off around the edges, slightly slurred and heavy. Soobin takes a hesitant pace forward. “When did you last eat?”

Again, Taehyun doesn’t offer a response, a ragged breath heaved audibly against Kai’s neck instead. Soobin answers it with a frustrated sigh of his own as silence mires between them all.

“Just need a nap,” Taehyun whispers after a minute, the syllables stilted. “I’ll be fine.”

Alright. Kai stares at the ceiling for a moment before he calls, “Endolphin.”

Immediately Taehyun tries to twist away from him, a fruitless effort even if he wasn’t clearly at the end of his already exhausted stamina. Kai merely tightens his arms around him, a cage now rather than a crutch. “Endolphin,” he says, addressing her as she spirals into being a little ways away, “when did Taehyun-ah last eat?”

She cocks her head to one side, processing, before she chirps, “Seventy-six hours and twenty-three minutes ago.”

“God damn it,” Soobin snaps, his head in his hands.

Three days. Kai blinks, guilt thundering through him in slow, painful storm rolls. “Taehyun-ah . . .”

“I’m *fine.*”

This time, by some miracle, Taehyun manages to steady himself, pushing away from Kai with too-stiff arms as he takes the tiniest step back. Kai’s almost impressed, or he would be, if Taehyun didn’t sway as soon as he straightens up fully. Soobin dives forwards just in time, that chasm of space closed as he yelps and catches Taehyun before he can topple back into the machinery behind him. “Taehyun-ah!” Alarmingly, Taehyun just slumps further, practically boneless save for the hand he fumbles to grip the front of Soobin’s shirt with. Kai stumbles towards him, a palm already pressed to Taehyun’s forehead before he realizes he won’t be able to feel anything. For a stricken second though he lingers, heartbroken all over again until he lets his arm fall back to his side. Soobin’s fingers replace his, and he huffs. “No fever,” he mumbles. “Thank god.”

“Not sick,” Taehyun grumbles. “Let me go.”

Soobin lifts an eyebrow, “What, so you can collapse on the floor? No thanks.”

The hand Taehyun had been using to clutch at Soobin’s shirt with flattens as he smacks it to the other man’s chest, barely even hard enough to make a sound. Soobin doesn’t so much as flinch. “I’m fine.” The insistence is a mantra now, one that rolls with such ease off of

Taehyun's tongue that Kai's starting to wonder just how long he's been repeating it to himself, too. "I'm fine."

Mouth flattening into a thin line, Soobin says, "You're not, Taehyun-ah. You can't even stand up."

"I can," Taehyun denies. He drags in a heavy breath that lingers too long in his lungs, like he needs the extra air to find his sense of gravity again, but it's no use. His knees buckle before he can even fully straighten his legs out, his weight now entirely on Soobin as he crumples back into his hold. Soobin grunts, going to kneel rather than struggle to stay standing now that he's entirely supporting the other man. ". . . Fuck," Taehyun sighs.

Silence settles in the room, the air thick with a suffocating sense of resignation and punctuated only by Taehyun's low, unsteady breathing. Even Endolphin is quiet, drifting between Kai and the monitors where she'd reappeared with Soobin's entrance. He really should leave, Kai thinks again bleakly, find somewhere else on the ship to hole up so that he's not in everyone's way like this. The intention to do so slips out before he can think better of it. "I'll go."

Kai jolts as one of Taehyun's hands, the one not already clinging to Soobin, snaps out and grasps fruitlessly at Kai's ribs, fumbling over bare skin. "No. *No. Don't,*" Taehyun pleads. "*Stay.*"

It's funny, really, how much guilt almost feels like drowning. "What if I'm making you sick?" Kai whispers.

He expects rebuttal, but the source is a surprise. Kai blinks, startled as Soobin vehemently mutters, "You're not."

". . . But-"

"You're not," he repeats. "I would know." He shrugs when Kai glances at him, staring down at Taehyun. "You should . . . Put on a shirt," Soobin adds after an uncomfortable pause.

Ah. Kai straightens up and spins on his heels, facing away from them. "Right. Sorry."

There's a shirt on the little shelf beneath the bed he'd been on, a pristine plain white. Kai reaches for it before the color registers. He freezes, fingers barely brushing the fabric. His pants are white too, Kai realizes with a flash of *something* that writhes around beneath his skin. They're just the standard medbay garb, but he can't make himself take the shirt, hand hovering just above it as the seconds tick by. This is stupid. *This is stupid.* He just needs to take it, put it on and-

"Huening-ah."

Kai snaps his arm back towards his body, curling the hand close to his chest as Soobin's voice filters through his thoughts.

"There's . . . Blue ones in the cabinet. Like the ones Taehyunie usually wears at night."

Oh.

He's not looking at him when Kai dares to glance his way, preoccupied with carding sweat-damp bangs out of Taehyun's eyes. It's deliberate, and Kai can't look at him for too long either, turning away to cross the room to the indicated storage cabinets where all the clean linens are. He keeps his back to both of them while he changes, practically flinging the white pants off in exchange for navy ones. Even though he can't feel the fabric, relief washes through him as soon as it's no longer touching him, that discomforted, panicky sensation that had swept through him at the thought of donning the shirt quelled beneath the fresh blues.

"Can you carry him?"

Soobin's tone is quiet, enough so that Kai really almost doesn't hear him at all. He turns slowly, a motion that he was clearly right to be hesitant about, as Soobin tenses up as soon as their eyes meet. But he doesn't look away this time, shuttered resignation heavy in his gaze as he tilts his chin to where Taehyun is still laying in his arms and breathing too hard. The request isn't a surprise, not at all, Soobin's never had fantastic upper body strength, but as Kai stares, he's dismayed to note that his usual lack of musculature isn't the issue. Like Yeonjun, Soobin is too thin, the haunted year behind him showing physically in a manner that's far more visible now, when he's dressed down in what he must have worn to bed, a loose t-shirt and sweatpants that don't hang right on his hips. Kai nods.

With things being the way they are, weight isn't an issue for him, his sensors merely pinging the exact mass of Taehyun's body when Kai hefts him up. It's alarmingly low, though Kai doesn't dare mention that out loud, suspecting now that this is something that's effected the whole crew in his absence, a consequence of both unfortunate necessity as well as grief. He tries to ignore the numerical data lingering in the back of his mind, the ghost of the sort of thoughts that might have filled his head were he just a little less human, and gives Taehyun a minute to get comfortable. Or as comfortable as he can, anyways, with Kai's too-cold skin and rigid frame. The shiver that trickles down his spine breaks Kai's fucking heart, but Taehyun only wraps his arms around his shoulders as it peters out, burying his face into the crook of Kai's throat with a sigh.

"If I make something, do you think you can stomach it?" Soobin asks softly as he stands. Taehyun grumbles something incomprehensible against Kai's neck. "Some broth, maybe? Please?"

"I'll try," Taehyun mumbles, and Kai suspects the answer isn't another stroke of stubbornness so much as the unfortunate truth. Taehyun's a doctor, he of all people would know the consequences of attempting to eat with a stomach that's been empty for days. An attempt is all they can really ask for.

The silence is leaden as Kai follows Soobin down the hall towards the ship's kitchen, thick and unbroken save for the occasional, small sound from Taehyun that Kai doesn't dare draw attention too, dismayed enough on his own without knowing if Soobin hears them too. Taehun's doing a fairly good job of muffling it though, the only proof of the depth of his upset the way the collar of Kai's shirt has dampened. He's always hated relying on other people like this, long before he accepted his role as their medic, and it's a feeling Kai

suspects has only worsened as they've gotten older. Taehyun had said it himself, hadn't he? *"A good doctor wouldn't . . ."*

Tentatively, Kai soothes a hand across Taehyun's back as he crosses the threshold of the kitchen, slow, careful strokes until that subtle tremble starts to ease, just a bit. "You're scaring me, Taehyunie," he murmurs once Soobin is out of immediate earshot, bustling around by the stove.

"Sorry," Taehyun hiccups.

"Don't be," Kai pleads. "Taehyunie, *I'm* sorry. I'm sorry you think you need to- to do stuff like *this* to look after me."

"Not just you."

Kai pulls out a chair, hooking his ankle around the leg of it to do so, and sits with Taehyun still held securely in his arms, the other man's weight balanced on his thighs as he leans back to card a hand through his hair. "I can guarantee you no one else wants you to work yourself to death for their sake either. Look," he nods towards where Soobin is frantically shuffling through their sad collection of pots, trying to find something clean amidst the mess of them in the sink, "you've made Soobin-ah *cook.*"

Taehyun sniffles against the curve of his throat, but doesn't respond. His fingers flex in the already wrinkled fabric of Kai's shirt. He's still shaking, almost as though he can't help it, quick, quiet shudders wracking through him in waves that Kai's certain are entirely due to emotionally overwrought exhaustion. Kai strokes a cautious hand over his back again, tracing out each trembling ripple in the other man's body from top to bottom, up and down as Taehyun's harsh breathing against his neck starts to deepen. His grip on Kai is still shockingly tight though, only seeming to tense further as his body tries to drag him towards sleep. "*Stop,*" Taehyun chokes suddenly, and he sounds so terrified that Kai stills without protest, palm splayed flat between the other man's shoulder blades.

"You need to rest-" Kai starts.

Taehyun shakes his head in the space between Kai's neck and shoulder.

"*Taehyun-ah.*"

It's no use. The moment has passed, and Taehyun is trembling anew, right back where he started on the verge of completely falling apart. Kai doesn't dare try and console him again, not after that awful, stricken sound Taehyun made. The fact that Kai doesn't have any body warmth to share, or heartbeat for Taehyun to find solace in where they're pressed together, probably isn't lending any favors to the situation either. Tentative fingers travel across the expanse of the other man's back again, trailing down a spine he can feel too much of. Taehyun shivers, but doesn't protest, every line of him stubbornly tense now. "Are you cold?" Kai asks softly.

Again, Taehyun shakes his head.

Unfortunately, Kai isn't at all inclined to believe that. "Taehyun-ah," he murmurs. "You're going to make yourself sick." *Or sicker,* Kai thinks grimly. "Let me at least get you a blanket."

Taehyun's hands clutching at the back of Kai's shirt twist tighter. "You're warm where we touch," Taehyun mutters against his throat, and Kai's hand on his back stills.

"That's just me absorbing all your body heat," Kai says, startled when Taehyun lets out a teary huff of denial.

"It isn't," Taehyun whispers fiercely.

He sounds oddly sure, and Kai doesn't really have room to argue since he can't feel it himself. As if to prove it, Taehyun burrows his face further into the crook of his neck, his arms around Kai's shoulders squeezing tight enough for Kai to note the faint pressure. The trembling doesn't stop, but after a few more heaving breaths it begins to ease, deep, lingering exhales and inhales no longer punctuated by uncontrollable tremors every single time. Still, Kai doesn't attempt to soothe him again, wary of cracking the lull that seems to have settled. He keeps a steady hand on Taehyun's back, a comforting press and nothing more, the tempo of a heartbeat beneath his palm just enough to keep him grounded, too.

"Here."

Kai blinks, startled to suddenly find Soobin standing over them. He doesn't look at Kai directly when he leans down to set a steaming mug on the table, his attention instead on Taehyun. Their hands don't touch when he runs his fingers down the medic's back, stopping just short of where Kai's own are splayed. "Taehyunie," he whispers, and the way his voice rasps around the affection, thick with concern, makes Kai want to cry. "Please. Just drink a little bit of it, okay?"

He donned an apron at some point, the lavender and blue fabric stained enough that Kai can't tell if it hasn't been washed in awhile, or if Soobin had just made that much of a mess from heating up a simple vegetable broth. It's a thought that doesn't have a purpose, one that goes nowhere and leads to nothing, because any teasing Kai might have engaged in before feels wholly wrong to say now. They're strangers, or they might as well be, standing on opposite sides of an unoccupied grave, mourning the same person. Kai can't even tease him in a friendly way, since they're not friends, either.

Taehyun lifts his head from the crook of Kai's shoulder. He levels Soobin with a look Kai can't see from where he is, long and lingering, a stare that Soobin meets unflinchingly. "Fine," he mumbles after a minute, resignation thick in his already weary tone. "*Fine.*"

When he sits up Kai is quick to readjust his hold, hands folding together low on Taehyun's spine to keep him from slipping off his lap. Soobin does the same, straightening so he can brace a palm between Taehyun's shoulders as the medic reluctantly grabs the mug from the table. The first few sips he takes are tentative at best, small and accompanied by a grimace. He shouldn't have anything too fast, Kai knows, but the sight of Taehyun's hesitation still makes something in his chest clench and coil. His eyes close as he draws in what seems like a

full mouthful, eyebrows knitting together as he drinks another, then a third, before he sets the mug right back down on the table.

As soon as his hands are free again, Taehyun tangles them in the neckline of Kai's shirt, thumbs grazing the faux skin beneath the fabric. His eyes are half lidded now, mouth a thin line as he sits there, oddly stiff and utterly quiet. "Sorry," he mumbles eventually, too soft, too slurred. He says it to Kai, but after a beat he tilts his head back to repeat it to Soobin as well. "Sorry, Soobin-ah."

"I know," Soobin returns, hushed.

Something's wrong, Kai realizes, heart in his throat. Taehyun's glazed eyes aren't normal, the abrupt calm that's blanketed around him unnatural, and he's already slumping heavily against Kai's chest when Kai turns his head to give Soobin a stricken look. "Did you *drug him?*"

Soobin doesn't meet his gaze. The hand he has on Taehyun's back kneads between the other man's shoulder blades, a gentle encouragement to slip even deeper into what's now clearly an induced sleep. Panicking, Kai knocks the captain's finger aside, desperate to check Taehyun's heartbeat for himself with how limp he's gone in his arms. His relief is short-lived once he finds it, steady and strong, though significantly slower than it had been before, the emotion quickly replaced with fury.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he hisses. "Why would you- what if you gave him too much?"

Nothing in the universe, Kai thinks hysterically, could have prepared him for the absolute, soul-crushing hollowness he finds in Soobin's eyes once they're finally on him. It's such a hopeless look, cold merely because there isn't any warmth there to find, void without everything that had once brightened it. Beneath that stare, Kai is hardly surprised by the empty, inflectionless, "You think this is the first time?"

Even without the ability to really breathe, somehow Kai's body still reacts as if it could, whatever machinery he's made of hitching harshly in his chest as the reality of the words sink in. Soobin looks away again, fixating on some distant spot in the kitchen as he adds, "This isn't any different than what Taehyun-ah had to do to me the other night, you know."

He's right. *He's right,* Kai admits to himself bitterly. It's exactly the same. But that just makes it worse. "That doesn't mean it's okay," he grits out.

If Soobin disagrees he doesn't say so, instead leaning over Taehyun's unconscious form to take the mug from the table and carry it over to the cluttered sink. He's deathly quiet as he washes the broth, and whatever drug he'd spiked it with, down the drain, quieter still when he starts putting everything away. It's a silence Kai doesn't dare to break, too angry and hurt to try.

"Our parents were friends."

The remark catches him off guard to the point where it takes awhile for Kai to really register it at all. Soobin's back is still to him, clean dishes sitting in a rack on the counter and his

hands gripping the edge so hard that Kai can see the way his forearms are tensed even from the other side of the room.

“Our parents were friends,” Soobin repeats, just as hoarse, just as strained. “Mine and . . . And Kai’s.”

Oh.

“We were . . . I was almost two, when he was born. And he was four days old when we met. There’s, uhm . . .” He chokes, a wet, *awful* noise that tears Kai in two from the inside out. “There’s a picture in my room. Of us. My eomma couldn’t- she- she couldn’t make me let . . . I d-didn’t want to l-let go of him, and I was- we were both crying, because Eomma was trying to pry me off of him, and he was- well, he was just a baby, so . . .”

It stings, hearing himself talked about like this. But Soobin isn’t wrong to do so, either. The person he’s discussing isn’t here anymore, and the weight of that sits heavy in the cage of Kai’s ribs.

“He- he literally knew me his whole life,” Soobin croaks. “*His whole life.* And I- it’s not- I don’t . . . I *can’t,* Huening-ah.”

He doesn’t need to elaborate, the hitching, broken syllables more than enough to convey the depth of his grief. Kai knows, almost too intimately, exactly what he’s trying to say.

It’s not the same. It will never be the same. They’re never going to be okay because the person Soobin grew up with, the person he loved, is not the person Kai is now.

This is different from Beomgyu’s guilt, though no less irreparable.

Soobin isn’t just scared, he’s *mourning.*

“I thought . . . For a minute, I thought maybe . . .” He draws off, breath staggering around another awful, heart wrenching sound. “That you might . . . That I could try . . .”

He’s talking about that moment right before The Ursa Minor had left The Endolphin’s communication range, Kai realizes with dismay, that brief second where he’d called out to him.

“I can’t,” Soobin repeats, the shaking cadence of it engraving itself into every already raw spot within Kai. “I can’t. *I can’t.* Huening-ah, I’m *sorry.*”

There isn’t just a chasm between them, Kai sees now, there’s a wall. Soobin can’t bridge the gap because there isn’t anything to cross, the divide a barrier rather than an empty space. They lost too much, sixteen whole years where they had *always* belonged to each other, time Kai can neither recall nor amend.

It’s different, with Soobin. Where Yeonjun is willing to start anew, Soobin has found an insurmountable grief, torn asunder as if his heart was ripped from his body still beating.

And it was, wasn’t it. The Kai he’s talking about never came home.

To him, the Kai sitting in The Endolphin's small kitchen is an entirely different person, a replacement for something that can't, and shouldn't, be replaced.

"I'm sorry," Kai whispers, if only because he has nothing else to offer.

Soobin shakes his head, the motion jerky between his taut, hunched shoulders.

He always said it more than any of them, before, quiet affections so easily doled out that Kai took them for granted. Even at the very end, when Soobin hadn't wanted to let go, had held Kai to him for as long as he could and Kai had known there was a chance the soft *"I love you"* breathed against his skin might be the last, he hadn't understood the reality of what that would mean.

It threatens to rend him in two, the way Soobin sobs out, "I loved him *s-so much,*" a eulogy for someone who's no longer here, ardor spoken to the ghost of him left behind in the machine.

Soobin doesn't look at him again, his whole frame trembling for long, agonizing minutes until he's able to drag in a breath that doesn't hitch beneath the weight of his grief. The way he takes off the apron is clumsy, unsteady fingers not bothering with the knot in the back as he tugs the whole thing over his head. His shirt rides up beneath it, bunching high along his spine, and Kai's eyes widen as he turns to throw it over the back of one of the other chairs at the table. The sight is only there for a brief second, a flash of skin that Kai would have missed had he not already been looking his way, so quick that Soobin doesn't seem to notice it at all as he fixes the collar of his shirt back into place before he strides from the room. He doesn't bid a goodbye, but Kai doesn't think he could have returned one anyways, too stunned to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth.

Soobin covers up that fleeting glimpse of handprints burned into his skin as if they weren't there at all, scrubbing the heel of a palm over his eyes as he departs, heedless of the way Kai stares after him.

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It's obvious Taehyun rarely sleeps in his room. The bed isn't made when Kai carries him in, and the sheets have that specific, stale smell clinging to them when Kai tucks the blankets around him. But it's the lack of clutter that really sticks out, the way everything is so clearly untouched while being oddly clean. It looks, Kai finds himself thinking grimly, like a mausoleum, tokens of a life once lived arranged just so to make it seem like their owner is still there to appreciate them.

There's a bookmark stuck a third of the way through Taehyun's favorite novel, its spine creased and worn but the pages stiff when Kai tries to open it. The pictures on his desk are carefully arranged, facing the bed without leaving any space to actually get any work done, and Kai stares at them for far too long, struck by the familiarity of the faces accompanied by the foreignness of the scenes. A lab coat is tossed over the back of the chair, but it's starchy when Kai goes to move it to the closet, another imitation of normalcy that falls short.
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Whatever Soobin drugged Taehyun with must be extremely effective, because the other man doesn't so much as tense when Kai carefully shifts him onto his side across the mattress and fits himself into the space behind him. He just goes, distressingly pliant while Kai tucks him back in and makes sure his head is elevated. Even his breathing doesn't falter, the slow and steady rise and fall of his chest the only solace Kai has as the hours begin to crawl by.

It's times like this that the dichotomy between him and the others is at its most stark, when Kai has nothing else to do except notice all the ways he no longer quite fits. He keeps one arm curled around Taehyun's middle, a hand splayed over the left side of the other man's chest, the pulse beneath his palm his last anchor beneath the soft hum of The Endolphin's engines. As far as he can tell, Taehyun doesn't even dream, no flicker of eyelids or hitch of breath to suggest such a thing. He just lies there, completely unconscious and unreachable, not stirring even when Kai cards worried fingers through his hair.

In the end, Kai isn't exactly sure how much time passes. He's almost too used to the way it slips through his fingers these days, the irony that even the minutes he's present for are filled with quiet nothingness like this not lost on him. Eventually though Taehyun starts to come to, his eyebrows furrowing his fingers flexing in the sheets. At first, Kai thinks he's going to wake up in increments, the way most people tend to, but in the same second the thought crosses his mind, Taehyun's eyes snap open, and he scrabbles at the sheets to lean over the side of the bed and heave.

Nothing comes up. What little he'd had of the broth was likely digested hours ago now, and the choking, shuddering gags that wrack through him are dry save for the splatter of saliva that drips onto the cold floor. Kai hesitates to even touch him, the hand he does lay on Taehyun's back so light he's not sure the other man feels it at all. The worst part, as always, is that he doesn't know what to do. "Taehyun-ah . . ."

Taehyun shakes his head between one retch and the next, a motion that does little to quell Kai's unease, but the subsequent breath he drags in stays in his lungs, held and exhaled with a tremble that courses through his entire frame. "S-sorry," he coughs, sinking back down into the sheets with another too deep breath. "Sorry. It always- that stuff makes me so nauseous. M'sorry."

The half spoken confession, the implication, mires the air in an instant. "You knew," Kai whispers. To his horror, Taehyun nods. "How . . . How often . . ."

"Dunno," Taehyun mumbles. "A lot. I lost track. It's- it's fine," he grits out through another heavy exhale. "If it keeps me functioning, then it's fine."

"No it's not," Kai protests. "How is that . . . Taehyunie, *none of this* is fine."

He doesn't like the way Taehyun looks at him, the tired sliver of his eyes he can see between the bed and the other man's mussed bangs. "Kai-ya," he says slowly, and Kai knows what's coming, knows the awful truth before it's spoken, "I asked him to. Ages ago."

The first time. Whenever that was. The first time, Taehyun had consented. And he'd likely done the same in most, if not all of the instances that arose after, either with words or with that same, quiet stare he'd leveled Soobin with earlier.

“I trust him,” Taehyun continues hoarsely. “I knew what he was doing when he offered to make me something to eat. It’s *fine*.”

Kai can’t meet his eyes, stricken silent by the weight of that revelation. There’s something about it being agreed upon, accepted, that makes it worse, the awful clarity of just how bad things have gotten now finally laid out in their entirety of Kai to see. And maybe it was foolish of him, blindly assuming Taehyun somehow had his shit together a little better than the rest of them, but that doesn’t make the reality of it any easier to bear.

Hadn’t Taehyun said it himself? They were falling apart.

They still are.

Fix it, Taehyun had said, as if Kai’s recreated body was the only thing that needed repairing, as if doing so would amend everything else.

Fix it.

Fix it.

Blindly, his vision flickering in and out, Kai fumbles through the sheets for Taehyun’s hand beside him, relieved when he finds it and the other man obligingly tangles their fingers together. “If I make you something, do you think you can eat it?” Kai asks shakily.

“Mm.”

It’s not a good response, neither here nor there, but it’s an offer to try. And Kai will take whatever he can get.

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“Don’t be too mad at Taehyunie.”

Kai doesn’t look up from the light layer of bubbles forming at the bottom of the pot of water, his shoulders stiff where he clutches at the counter beside the stove the same way Soobin did many hours prior. The words filter in one ear and out the other, barely acknowledged and nothing more, silence left in their wake.

“He’s really the only sane person left aboard this ship.”

At that, Kai does lift his head. “He shouldn’t have to be.”

The low, bitter bark of a laugh Yeonjun lets out stings. “No,” he agrees. “But he’s doing a way better job at it than the rest of us.”

When Kai turns to face him the first thing he notes is the dark rings under his eyes, fresh exhaustion painted overtop of old. It makes quite a sight, especially paired with the deep cut on his cheek, still an angry red, and the hint of a burn Kai spots in the hollow of his throat. Guilt coils in the center of his chest, and it takes him a second to see that Yeonjun has lifted a beckoning arm for him.
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It's stupid, how quickly that works, how Kai barely even blinks before he crosses the space between them. Yeonjun sweeps him into his embrace with a low, contented hum, a hand in Kai's hair and the other splayed over his back. Kai settles his chin on his shoulder, not even the least bit subtle when he uses the position to ruck Yeonjun's uniform shirt up and reveal more fingerprint burn marks.

"Hey," Yeonjun scolds. "Don't make that face."

"You can't even see my face right now," Kai points out darkly. There's only one more that he can find, a pink outline halfway up Yeonjun's spine that fits his hand perfectly, but it's still one too many. He leans back to examine the similar mark on Yeonjun's front, ignoring the unamused sound the other man huffs on when he tugs the collar of his shirt down to look at where it's seared into the skin across his clavicles.

He's caught off guard when a thumb presses to his lips, traveling from one side to the other like it's trying to smooth out his frown. "Kai-ya," Yeonjun starts.

Kai cuts him off. "All I've done since I came back is hurt people."

He flinches when Yeonjun cups his face between his palms. "*Kai-ya.* Baby, that is *not true.*"

"Isn't it?" Kai hitches out, and he doesn't understand how he can sound so frayed when he doesn't have vocal cords to strain. "We're- everyone's falling apart, and I don't- *I don't know how to fix it.*"

Again, he goes when Yeonjun tugs at him, unsteady hands grasping for that equally unsteady support as he buries his face against the other man's shoulder, chasing the proximity until he can make out the drum of a heartbeat against the hollows of his own rib cage.

"I love you so much," Yeonjun murmurs, and Kai muffles a whimper into the crook of his neck, struck low by the weight of where they're standing, the echo of similar confessions that are still hanging like a shadow over Kai's head. The present tense almost brings him to his knees. "*So much,*" Yeonjun reiterates fiercely. "Which means a couple little burns like this mean *nothing* to me, do you understand?"

"But-"

"And as for fixing things," Yeonjun continues unimpeded, "the mistakes we made while you were gone, the people we became, that's not your responsibility."

In a better universe, that might be true. And wouldn't it be so easy if it was. If the only thing Kai had to focus on was himself, all of this would hurt so much less.

But Taehyun's words are still rattling around in his mind, too true to ignore or set aside. "It's kept me human," he whispers.

". . . What has?"

He can't feel the heat of the burn on Yeonjun's skin when he fits a palm against it, finds the shape of himself left behind as he distantly wonders if it will scar, and the rhythm of the other

man's heart where they're pressed together only reaches him in faint, far-away beats. In some ways, Yeonjun's not wrong. The year they were seperated and everything it entailed isn't Kai's burden to bear, the regrets therein wrought by hands other than his. Still, though. *Still.*

"You're part of me," Kai murmurs. "All of you. The part that stayed human."

Fix it.

Fix it.

He loves the way Yeonjun threads his fingers in his hair, how their noses brush when he puts just enough space between them to bump their foreheads together as he looks Kai in the eye. "I know it won't be the same," Kai says, "but I want to *try.* Don't you?"

They can be different people. They *are* different people. And maybe, they can also be *better* people.

Yeonjun swallows, the heavy bob of his adam's apple conveying so much. He doesn't answer for a moment, blinking hard before he finally looks away. "You know I'm one of the ones that fucked up, right?"

"I know."

The sharp, broken laugh Yeonjun lets out breaks Kai's heart. "Yeah. Well, I'm glad. I don't want you being disillusioned into thinking that I'm a good person just because I never tried to push you away." He shakes his head before Kai can decide how to respond to that, the tense, tired line of him wilting as his hand drops from Kai's hair to sit loosely along the back of his neck, thumb tracing out the bridge of his spine. "I'll try," he swears. "But you can't . . . You can't be upset if it doesn't work, alright? The mess I made . . . It doesn't really deserve forgiving."

". . . I forgive you."

Yeonjun stares at him, eyes wide, the hand on the nape of Kai's neck stilling. "For what?"

He knows what. *He knows.* Kai shifts his hold, trailing careful fingers down Yeonjun's back as he keeps him within the circle of his arms. It's not the same, this paltry little recompense for something Kai never blamed him for in the first place. But it's a start, a step, the first, Kai hopes, of many. And if Yeonjun can accept that what happened to Kai wasn't his fault, maybe he can do the same for Beomgyu, too. "I forgive you," Kai repeats.

Yeonjun's hands shake where they're clutching at him, the grief in the breath he drags in so palpable that it hurts just to hear.

Fix it.

Fix it.

"I- I don't deserve that," Yeonjun chokes. "I- I left you. Kai-ya, I *left you.*"

There isn’t anything Kai can say to convince him otherwise, no comfort he can offer to assure Yeonjun that, in the end, he had embraced his fate with open arms, because Yeonjun will never see it that way. So he does this instead, stumbling across the divide a little more with every reiteration, pulling them back together one tangled up piece of thread at a time.

“Hyung, *I forgive you.*”

The hands holding on to him scrabble for a better grip, shaking fingers seeking out a warmth only provided by the surety of connection as Yeonjun drags him close enough to bury his face against the crook of Kai’s neck and weep.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review if you enjoyed this chapter, or the fic so far. They're basically the only thing that keeps me working on this lmao.

Chapter 7: Seven

Chapter Summary

> Taehyun casts him a long, wary glance before he takes a lingering sip of the broth and sets it aside. “Well?” he prompts.
>
> Kai stiffens. Huh?
>
> “You clearly want to ask me something,” Taehyun goes on. “Go ahead.”

Chapter Notes

> Vacation bay-bee! Time to write!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s an old story Kai can no longer recall the name of where a fool wastes away beside the water, starved after being entranced by their own reflection. He remembers thinking of it once, on a lonely shift sitting on the bridge as The Endolphin hummed her way through some far off, unnamed system, a glass tablet clutched in his hands. It had been a habit by that point, scrolling through the ship’s many logged surveillance videos just for something to pass the time. Not everything was kept, of course, even a vessel of The Endolphin’s size doesn’t have that much digital space to waste. For the most part a day’s recorded video feed would stay accessible for a week, and then anything that hadn’t already been saved to a crew member’s personal data catalogue would be deleted.

Relief unfurls in Kai’s chest when he finds that, despite his access password being changed, none of his files have been touched. They’re sorted messily, some of the folders only labeled with dates that Kai struggles to remember the significance of. Others are categorized by names, either of the subjects in them or the galaxies they’d been in when the events therein had occurred. In a sad, distant sort of way, Kai almost wishes these would have been the memories he lost instead, if only because of how much of the six years he spent aboard The Endolphin have been immortalized in this fashion. There’s some of everything here, celebrations and quiet moments, mundane afternoons and intimate evenings, all of which Kai already remembers.

Years from now, when The Endolphin is just an empty shell either drifting through space or decomposing on a far off planet, Kai wonders if these little moments will be left behind. There’s a possibility that a thousand years from now, someone somewhere will stumble upon

her, dust off an abandoned access panel or control console, and find ghostly bits and pieces in the place of graves, a time traveller standing amidst a record of people they'll never meet.

In a strange sort of way, that's exactly how Kai feels now.

He doesn't dare linger on any one video for too long, stealing fleeting glimpses of a life that doesn't feel like his, and letting the ache they leave linger behind his ribs.

The thing that strikes him the most is something he already knows, and yet somehow the sound of it haunts him anyways, a vicious reminder of everything he isn't.

On the screen, the Kai he isn't dissolves into peels of laughter as easily as he breathes, the reflex just that, unbidden and bright. He laughs at everything, mirth echoing through the ship's halls that he runs down with Beomgyu the time they stole all of Yeonjun's pants while he was in the shower, quiet amusement huffed out as he and Taehyun eat dinner together in the kitchen, sharing a single, over-crowded plate. It rings in the air when Yeonjun spins and dips him to the beat of an old Earth tune only to pull him back up until their noses brush, and it's muffled into the crook of Soobin's neck as Kai bows over him, teasing kisses left to the taut line of his throat when the other man throws his head back, hands scrabbling over Kai's spine.

It's a wonder, really, Kai thinks as he closes that last file, how no one had noticed something was wrong sooner. In hindsight it seems so obvious, the pieces of him that are left barely holding a candle to the person he was.

He sits there for awhile as that thought festers inside him, the tablet set aside in the sheets pooled around his thighs. His hand cards absentmindedly through Taehyun's hair while his vision flickers, slow strokes that are more of a placebo than anything. It's just sight, really, the repetitive motion only distracting because of the fact that he can see himself doing it, and nothing more. Taehyun barely even stirs, the arm he has stubbornly wrapped around Kai's middle the only part of him that moves, squeezing tighter as though he thinks Kai might try and slip away while he dreams.

When he finally picks up the tablet again, Kai ignores the slight tremble in his fingers, exiting his personal files to access the more recent recordings instead.

Finding what he's after doesn't take long, the hardest part simply being that, with his bouts of lost time, he can't quite recall what the correct date would be. Fortunately that's an easy thing to narrow down, and after a few minutes he's found exactly what he's looking for.

On the screen The Ursa Minor enters the hangar as though it's tripping, a wing knocking against the open bay door in the hangar's floor as it jostles into position to land. Barely a minute passes once the passage to the stars beneath it closes before the room's airlock hisses open, almost simultaneous with the fighter's cockpit doing the same.

Yeonjun stumbles into view first, dragging a limp Kai with him. The fear in his eyes is obvious even from the somewhat distant camera angle, and Kai's so stricken by the sight of it that he almost doesn't hear the wild, frantic shout of his name from just outside the frame.

“Kai-ya!”

Despite anticipating it, somehow the sight of Soobin bursting into the hangar still makes Kai freeze in surprise. It's the panic that stuns him, he realizes as he watches Soobin race across the room, so starkly different to how he'd behaved only hours before that mission. And just like with Yeonjun, despite how far away the camera is from The Ursa Minor's cockpit, it's obvious that Soobin is . . .

He skids to a halt in front of Yeonjun, chest heaving as he reaches for where Kai is collapsed heavily in Yeonjun’s shaking arms. “What happened?” he asks, and the words hitch high, cracking in the air. “What *happened?*”

“I don’t know,” Yeonjun croaks, equally as panicked. “He was hit with- with that *thing* in there and he keeps-”

As if cued, Kai tenses in his hold, lifeless in one second and seizing in the next, a hoarse, awful noise ripped from him. Yeonjun scrambles to try and keep him upright, but it’s too much for one person, and Kai’s body starts to crumple down before Soobin surges forwards to catch him.

“Kai-ya!”

Yeonjun swears loudly, frantic grip going to where Kai’s hands have blindly grasped out for something to hold onto as he’s wracked through with agony. “No no no, wait, he’s-”

It’s too late, and Soobin gasps as Kai’s fingers find purchase against his back when he sags forwards. “Fuck, he’s burning up!”

“Kai-ya,” Yeonjun pleads weakly, and with the distant angle of the hangar’s single security camera, Kai can still see that his palms are pink, already singed from all the places he’s touched Kai, too. “Kai-ya, you can’t- *Kai-ya,* you’re *hurting him.*”

But the Kai of the past doesn’t seem to hear him, choking on only wretched, pained sounds as he writhes. He’s rucked up Soobin’s uniform beneath his hands, palms splayed over bare skin, fingers flexing helplessly, burning *burning* ***burning.***

“Help me carry him,” Soobin gasps.

Kai closes the video. His ears are ringing, the lull of The Endolphin’s engines barely filtering through the confused and muddled thoughts clouding his mind. Almost absentmindedly, he reaches for Taehyun’s arm curled around his middle, seeking out the warmth of skin he can’t feel before he realizes what he’s doing. In his sleep, Taehyun tightens his grip, and Kai purses his lips, eyes closing against the way his vision starts to flicker. He should stop, he thinks distantly, he wasn’t meant to see any of this, and yet . . .

He taps on the screen of the tablet again before he even fully opens his eyes, pulling up the feed from the medbay.

It’s not much different than what he already saw in the hangar. Soobin and Yeonjun stumble through the doors, Kai supported between them. He’s gone alarmingly limp again, feet literally dragging as the two men haul him over the threshold. There’s no fanfare to it, why would there be, if anything their entrance only sparks further panic.

Beomgyu is sitting up in bed, or he’s trying to anyways, leaning on the side of his body that’s still whole with both palms braced to the thin mattress, blanket tangled around his thighs and his eyes wide. Taehyun must have already been trying to get ready, because he’s bustling around before Soobin even shouts for him.

“Here, over here,” Taehyun orders, gesturing to the same bed Kai woke up in the first time. “Lay him down and I’ll-”

On the screen, Kai starts seizing again before he can finish. It’s worse than the previous time, the way he tenses and twists so violent that Yeonjun is knocked to the floor. Soobin yelps, desperately trying to hold Kai steady on his own, but by now he’s shaking too.

“He’s dying,” Beomgyu gasps from his bed, voice trembling. “*Kai-ya,* he’s- *he’s*-”

“Let go of him,” Taehyun snaps abruptly, his eyes round and terrified as Soobin struggles to keep Kai from hitting the floor. “Are those his handprints on you!? Let go of him, Soobin!”

“No!”

Kai drops the tablet. It makes a dull sound as it hits his knees and slides away into the blankets, the recording out of sight while the audio still plays on.

Beomgyu wails, the sound so awful that Kai’s first instinct is to cover his ears, but he can’t. He can’t move, frozen in horror as the captured feed keeps going.

“Take him out of here!” Taehyun snaps from the unseen footage. “We don’t know how bad this is, and Beomie is already sick. *Take him!*”

There’s a scuffling sound, likely Beomgyu fighting against being lifted and carried in the way Kai suspects he must have been. Yeonjun curses, the sharp noise bitten back as his unsteady tenor says, “Beomgyu- *ya*-”

“He’s dying!” Beomgyu chokes. “He’s *dying!* Let me go! *Kai!*”

The hiss of the medbay door gives away that Yeonjun had not done any such thing, and Beomgyu’s anguished sobs are cut off as it slides closed again, leaving only the sounds of Kai’s writhing, broken body, and Soobin’s pained inhales behind.

“He’s hurting you-” Taehyun starts.

“I’m *fine,*” Soobin snaps. “Help me get him on the bed, then I’ll- I’ll hold him down so you can- can *fix him."*

A hand reaches out from beneath the blankets, fumbles for the glass, and Kai blinks numbly as the video’s sound comes to a sudden halt.

“Don’t do that,” Taehyun mumbles against his side.

He’s careless as he throws the tablet to the end of the bed, so heedless that Kai knows this must have been how he broke all those ones in the medbay, too. It’s just a passing thought, a strange realization in the midst of all the jumbled emotions threatening to overwhelm him. Beside him, Taehyun sits up. His arm doesn’t leave where it’s still wrapped around Kai’s middle, and after a beat his other one joins it, his chin tucked into the crook of Kai’s neck. “I’m going to change the passwords again,” he says darkly.

It’s the last thing Kai expects him to say, and it’s such a shock that everything inside Kai seems to grind to a halt. “I . . . I’ll just . . . You know I can crack most passwords in ten minutes or less, right?” he hedges.

Taehyun hums a soft affirmative. “Yeah. Hey,” he lifts a hand, carding his fingers through Kai’s hair before he cups it around his jaw, leaning back to tilt Kai’s face towards his, “look at me?”

Kai does, tense when Taehyun immediately breathes out a low, wounded little sound. His other hand raises too, so achingly gentle as he shifts to cradle Kai’s face between his palms that Kai wants to cry. His vision falters again. “*Kai-ya* . . .”

“M’sorry,” Kai whispers. It’s practically a reflex at this point, apologies slipping from him in place of the breaths he can no longer exhale. Taehyun’s brows furrow.

“Why would you look at that?”

Ah. Kai averts his eyes, wincing when one of Taehyun’s hands drops to his thigh instead, thumb pressing into the faux skin there just hard enough for him to sense the shape of it. “I, uh . . . I saw Soobin’s back. Earlier. After he knocked you out.”

He can practically feel Taehyun’s frown, and he stares resolutely down at the hand on his leg instead. Tentatively, he reaches out to twines their fingers together, relief coursing through him when Taehyun merely turns his palm over to let him. “That’s not your fault,” he says, so soft that Kai almost doesn’t hear him at all.

It’s impressive, really, how much his grief and regret can still take such a vicious hold upon his body. Swallowing past the lump that he swears he can feel in his throat does nothing to ease it, and Kai untangles their hand to scrub the heel of it into his eyes, biting his lip as his vision wavers even more. “Taehyun-ah, I *hurt him.*”

This is *exactly* what Soobin was afraid of, and it’s not just him Kai did it to, either. Both Yeonjun and Taehyun are also sporting similar marks, proof that Kai is just as dangerous as Soobin thought he was.

“He was- you heard him,” Taehyun tries, “it’s- he said it was fine.”

Was it, though? Or was he just saying that because the alternative was Kai doing the same, or *worse,* to someone else.

Kai shakes his head. It won't do to dwell on it, a sentiment Taehyun clearly agrees with, the thumb rubbing circles against his thigh grounding in the faint outlines of pressure Kai convinces himself he can feel more than he does. "Um, I made you some more broth," he hedges quietly when he turns towards the other man again. Taehyun shifts to accommodate the movement, just enough so that they don't get completely twisted together. His other hand braces to the mattress behind Kai's back, the rest of him close enough still that his clavicles press against Kai's right arm. "I put it in one of those thermoses, uh, the ones that have the little heating coil in the bottom. You knows so it -er- stays warm . . ."

The smile that slowly curls into the corners of Taehyun's mouth makes something stutter in the center of Kai's chest. "Thank you."

The silence that settles between them does so without resistance, oddly comforting in its own way as Kai finds where he left the thermos on the little bedside table and passes it to Taehyun. They sit just like that for awhile, Kai fiddling with the blanket that he tucks back in around their waists, and Taehyun taking cautious sips of the broth, quiet, separate thoughts only broken by the steady hum of The Endolphin's engines. The tips of Taehyun's fingers are pink from the heat when Kai does look his way, his eyes half-lidded when he tilts the thermos up for another small taste. He's tired, Kai recognizes with a pang. Even after how much sleep he's gotten, he's still tired.

Then again, Kai is too. He wonders if it's the same, if the exhaustion that lays so heavily in the way Taehyun holds himself is just a mirror image of his own, unshakable and bone deep.

"I didn't drug that, by the way."

Taehyun's eyes widen, and he coughs, pulling the thermos away from his lips to cover a startled choking noise with the back of a hand. He arches an eyebrow in Kai's direction. "Ha ha," he grouses.

This time, the quiet atmosphere is a little thicker, less easy, and Kai watches as Taehyun casts him a long, wary glance before he takes a lingering sip of the broth and sets it aside. "Well?" he prompts.

Kai stiffens. Huh?

"You clearly want to ask me something," Taehyun goes on. "Go ahead."

Does he? Kai stares at him, caught off guard by the nonchalance of the statement. Off the top of his head, he can't fathom what Taehyun means. There's nothing that sticks out as more important between one thought and the next, no singular pressing question bothering him more than any other. Except, maybe . . .

Taehyun's hand is on his thigh again, the barely there feeling of it muffled even more with the blanket between his palm and Kai's faux skin. "You've wanted to ask for awhile, haven't you," he whispers. "It's okay."

He says it so simply, as if it doesn't hurt, as if whatever scars the last year has left behind are nothing but a dull ache. But Kai can see that's not quite true, the way Taehyun blinks once,

twice, a little too hard, and draws in a slow inhale that he keeps trapped in his lungs before letting it go, says so much.

“It’s okay,” he repeats. “If you want to know. I would, too. It’s okay.”

It takes a moment for Kai to gather the words, even when he needs so few of them to say it. They’re a burden on the tip of his tongue, sticking to the roof of his mouth once they finally rise up from where he buried them inside him. And still, they ache to ask aloud.

“Did *any* of you stay together after . . . After I was gone?”

This time Kai expects the silence. Taehyun draws in another lingering breath, the hand on Kai’s thigh squeezing before he murmurs, “Soobin and I . . . Sort of. I wouldn’t really call it being ‘together,’ in the way you’re asking, though. It was . . . It wasn’t the same, more like . . .” Another breath, and Kai’s heart breaks as he hears the way it hitches, just a bit. “I guess I’d call it ‘going through the motions,’ if I had to describe it.”

That’s enough. Kai wants to tell him that, assure him that he’s already said enough, that in the end it doesn’t really matter if Kai knows or not. But Taehyun just closes his eyes, drags in another shaking inhale, and goes on.

“You know what the worst part of it all is?” It’s a rhetorical question, one Taehyun answers as soon as he asks it. “I’m the one who convinced everyone to defect from the fleet.”

Kai can’t feel the cold, but somehow a chill works its way down his spine anyways. “What?”

“It was me,” Taehyun sighs, as though the confession doesn’t mean anything, isn’t burdened down by the weight of even more unsaid things. “When we took Beomgyu-ya back to Meon Jigu to heal, they wanted to ground him indefinitely. So I decided to leave.” He shrugs, a too casual motion for the words spilling out of his mouth, his hand slipping from Kai’s as he does it to fist in his lap instead. “I told Soobin-ah and Yeonjunie they could either stay, or come with me, and, well . . .” With his now empty hand, he gestures at the cluttered bedroom around them, a single room in a single ship trudging through the infinite depths of space. “Here we are.”

In a way, it sounds almost idyllic, the exact sort of fantasy Kai had dreamed of fulfilling when he’d been human. Run away. All of them. Together. The universe could go fuck itself. But it’s obvious that Taehyun doesn’t see it like that, his exhausted, half-lidded eyes and self-deprecating smile trailing after Kai’s wayward thoughts. “Why is that the worst part?” Kai asks before he can think better of it.

Taehyun tilts his gaze back towards him, that sore little smirk fading as he stares at Kai. “Because I’m also the one that made Beomgyu-ya hate himself.”

Sometimes, Kai feels like he isn’t even there. He’s a detached piece of all he used to be, a cluster of thoughts and emotions without roots to take hold of it, looking in upon a scene that’s playing out without him. It’s moments like this that stir that feeling into a frenzy, when someone he loves says something that, were he human, would have stolen all the breath from

his lungs. Taehyun says it as if it's obvious, as if the answer has been there sitting in plain sight for everyone to see, and somehow Kai has just simply missed it.

"I was too much of a doctor," Taehyun whispers, his voice hitching, wet, "and not enough of a *partner.*"

He scrubs a hand over his eyes on the heels of those words, and then does it again when the action doesn't do much to quell the tears welling too fast to staunch. "I- uh- h-he came to me, first, when he was healed enough to, you know, *do things,* and I- I was too, I was so scared I was going to hurt him, and . . ."

Oh no. *Oh no.*

"I tried to tell him that, but he took it as- as *pity,* and then when Yeonjunie treated him the same way- he- he thought we didn't- that we didn't w- *want him anymore.*"

From where he's standing now, an outsider merely listening to someone retell the missing pages of a story he only knew parts of, Kai knows it seems like such a stupid mistake. But it wasn't. Some pitfalls are obvious, misplaced words and misplaced hurts, and others, Kai thinks, are much quieter. They sneak up on you, layered in good intentions and guilt-ridden actions, insidious only in hindsight. It was probably so easy, really, for things to fall apart. Softly. Swiftly. Silently. There in one moment, and gone the next.

Just like Kai.

"I-I know Junie blamed himself," Taehyun hiccups hoarsely, "f-for what happened to Beomie. And maybe that was part of it, but I was- *I was the one* who couldn't hold him without second guessing myself. That- t-that was m- *me.*"

It's an agony Kai knows too intimately, burned into his mind, a phantom press of hands to his chest pushing him away on the ship's blanket strewn bridge. He closes his eyes, a shiver wracking through him as he seeks out the sound of The Endolphin's engines to steady himself.

"I *defected for him* and I couldn't even- I couldn't even h-hold him like he deserved to be held!"

There's no use trying to hide his anguish anymore, and Taehyun buries his face in his palms with a muffled, choking sob, shoulders shaking. At first, Kai doesn't even know if he should touch him, the hand he lifts to try falling back to his side after a long, uncertain moment. "Taehyunie . . ."

A better person, Kai's sure, would have already said that it wasn't true. And maybe that's just more proof that Kai isn't the same as he once was, that he came back *different* in all the wrong ways. Or maybe it means that, at least on some level, Taehyun is right.

Afterall, Kai's heard it with his own ears.

Beomgyu had called himself *"gross."*

“You’ll get used to it, eventually.”

At the time, it had seemed like nothing more than a bitter, spiteful statement. And it still is. But now it sits in that ever hollow place in Kai’s chest, weighed down with so much more. Because in the end, that’s exactly what happened, wasn’t it. They all got used to it, mired down with unvoiced regrets as they settled into lives half lived, barely civil words replacing ardent affections.

As if to confirm it, Taehyun whispers, “It’s . . . It’s easier to say it to you, than to them.”

Kai blinks. “Say what?”

“That I love you.” Something constricts in Kai’s chest. Tight. Painful. “Because you weren’t here. You weren’t part of the mess we made of . . . Of everything. And you know, a- a really *stupid* part of me thought, when we first found you, that maybe that was enough. That . . . That you just *being here* would magically fix everything. Of course it wouldn't. Nothing is ever going to be the same ever again.”

“That’s not stupid,” Kai murmurs.

“Yes it is,” Taehyun mutters, and the sound of it is so coarse, so clipped, that it’s nearly a laugh.

It’s not. “I can’t fix everything,” Kai says, “and I can’t . . . It’s not something that’s going to happen overnight. But it’s not stupid to think . . . To think that what we have here, what we *had,* isn't beyond saving.”

Taehyun shakes his head, and the readiness with which he does it, like he believes that isn't true with ever fibre of his being, breaks Kai’s fucking heart.

“Do you still love him?” Kai asks. “Beomgyu-ya?”

A beat passes before Taehyun reacts, stillness only shattered when his breath catches before he nods.

“And Yeonjunie?”

Another nod.

Kai frames his face with his hands, thumbs brushing away the tears that have pooled anew in the corners of Taehyun’s eyes. “Doesn’t that make you want to try? You’re right, it’s never going to go back to the way it was, but maybe we can start over. That wouldn’t be so bad, would it? Finding all the new ways the people we are now fit together? Maybe it’s not magic, but it is *something.* And I want to believe that something is worth fighting for. Don’t you?”

It’s slow, almost sombre, Kai thinks, the tentative way Taehyun nods that final time. Of course it is, how could it not be? They can’t move on without also letting go. But he does nod, lets Kai soothe a fresh wash of tears from his cheeks before he shakes his hands from his face and tangles their fingers together instead. “Okay,” he whispers. “Okay.”

~~~***~~~

Kismet. That's the first word Kai thinks of when he steps into the ship's little kitchen to find Beomgyu sitting at the table. Really, there's no other word for it. It's uncanny how out of the only three times Kai's even been in this room since he was rescued, he's managed to inhabit it at the exact same moment as the person he needed to see the most. With that in mind, calling it fate doesn't seem quite as corny and wistful as it might otherwise.

Kai stands in the doorway to the kitchen, utterly still without the need to breathe, Taehyun's thermos clutched between his hands, and waits for Beomgyu to notice him.

It takes a second, slow sands draining by, but after a beat Beomgyu seems to register that he's no longer alone, and jolts slightly as he looks up at him. By now, Kai's used to seeing tired eyes and exhausted expressions, but somehow that doesn't make them any easier to bear. Beomgyu stares at him, and stares, and *stares,* before what finally slips out of his lungs and into the air is an unsteady, "You're alive."

The words don't ring like a question, probably because it isn't one. But it's also not much of a statement, either, shadowed in too much genuine incredulity to sound certain. It's a reminder, to Kai at least, of how *terrified* Beomgyu had sounded when he'd been brought into the medbay, unconscious and seizing.

He loves him. Beomgyu *loves him.* It's so obvious, so agonizingly *there* in everything he does, whether he thinks Kai sees it or not. But it has nowhere to go, twisting and coiling and tangling in the air between them.

Because Beomgyu still doesn't want to be loved back.

It's that that stalls Kai's tongue, makes it seem too heavy to speak around in his mouth as he tries to decide what to say. He's sure, almost instinctively, that Beomgyu will bristle at any reassurances he could offer, and get pricklier still if Kai tried to joke the way he might once have. So really, the only thing he can do is nod.

Beomgyu sucks in a stuttered breath, and the eyes that had been raking over Kai centimeter by centimeter, as if confirming he's all still there, intact, dart away to fixate on the table. He sits a little stiffer in his chair, hands clenching against the flat surface before he eventually just drops them into his lap. It's that motion that makes Kai finally take in the full scene, following the movement subconsciously.

A pair of crutches are hooked over the back of the chair, both the handles and the cushions worn down enough that Kai can instantly tell they've been used quite a bit. Parts of the metal have been doodled on in some sort of permanent ink, nothing artsy, just thick stripes interwoven with a few basic shapes, stars and hearts and squiggled words he can't read from where he's standing. In a way, the disorder of them matches the reason they're needed, though Kai only lets his gaze linger on the visible stump of Beomgyu's right leg for a heartbeat he doesn't have. The stitches look good, he notes faintly when he does, clean and neat, the skin around them uninflamed. He wonders if it'll turn into another scar, one more for the mottled collection of them, but shakes that thought aside before it can settle. It doesn't matter.
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“Can I come in?” he asks quietly.

If Beomgyu noticed him looking, he doesn’t comment on it, the shrug of his shoulders the only answer he gives as Kai slips into the kitchen proper.

Letting the silence settle after that is easy. Uncomfortable, but easy. Beomgyu stays quiet while Kai washes out the thermos, and doesn’t speak up when Kai spends a solid five minutes looking for where the instant noodles are kept, or when he takes another five after that to find a pot to boil water in. The only noise in the room is the absentminded scratch of the nail on his forefinger over the table, a restless tick with a regularity that could almost keep track of time.

“Is that for Taehyunie?”

The askance is so soft, barely even audible at all, and Kai doesn’t dare to turn around to face Beomgyu to answer it.

“Yeah.”

“Soobin-ah said he fainted. Again.”

For some reason the statement seems oddly loaded, and Kai hesitates for a moment to reply to it. “He did,” he admits quietly. “But he’s feeling a lot better now.”

“He shouldn’t have pushed himself.”

Yep. There it is. It’s not much of an undercurrent anymore, if anything, it’s painfully obvious that Beomgyu is mad.

“No,” Kai agrees tentatively. “I don’t think he feels he has a choice, though.”

This time the way they falter into silence is unstable, almost as if they tripped over their own tongues, the atmosphere thick and uneasy. Kai keeps his eyes on the water in the pot, watching the little bubbles of heat start to gather at the bottom and swim upwards one by one. He can hear Beomgyu scratching at the table again, a steady remedy to fill some of the void. There’s more to say though, Kai can practically feel it, a tense energy in the room that, after a moment, he realizes, might be due to how Beomgyu is breathing. It's not labored, or harsh, but it definitely isn't normal, every inhale and exhale measured as though if he doesn't think about it, he'll forget how to do it entirely.

"He defected for me."

Kai grips the counter beside the stove, shoulders hunching, scared that if he turns to look at Beomgyu now, he'll stop talking again. "I know," he whispers.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

Beomgyu draws in a long inhale. "That's ironic, right? That he did that? And then I ended up being the one that . . . That made him sick . . ."

The scratching stops, and Kai clenches his fingers around the lip of the counter.

"I was . . . Really fucked up when we left Meon Jigu. Like *really* fucked up," Beomgyu says. There's almost no inflection in his tone, the syllables mechanical, as if he's not even really talking about himself. "They had to take me before I was healed. The Gigye had pretty much turned my knee and all the bones in my foot and calf into dust. By the time you guys found me, I already had a pretty nasty infection. Even after the amputation, my fever wouldn't go down. I know . . . I, uh, watched the logs after . . . Everything . . . And it was obvious they all thought they were going to lose me." He stumbles to a stop with an exhale that rattles, and Kai has to look, has to check to see if he's okay. He can't *not.*

Beomgyu's expression is shuttered, his posture rigid, his knuckles white where he's folded his hands together on the table. "I guess it was pretty touch and go, and with Yeonjun-ah hurt too, and Soobin-ah . . ." He clams up, shifting a quick, fleeting glance in Kai's direction that says enough, that says *too much.* There's no need for him to say what was wrong with Soobin, Kai *knows.* "Well, um, there was really only . . . Only Taehyunie was in any shape to watch over me. So he did. For *days.* "

"That's not your fault," Kai says softly.

Beomgyu's eyebrows furrow. "Isn't it? I'm the one that downplayed my injury before the mission. I'm the one that got caught." He clenches his hands tighter, tight enough that they tremble from strain where they are twisted together. Kai's faux heart climbs into his throat. "The first time he overworked himself, he hit his head when he passed out."

Something lurches in Kai's middle. "*What?*"

"I-I wasn't awake. No one was around to catch him. He- he hit the floor really hard. Soobin had to pull his shit together before he was ready so that he could take care of him, and it was all . . . It was all such a *mess* and in the end it just . . . It comes back around to me, you know?" He swallows, the dry click of his throat audible. "I fucked up first. So I get it."

". . . Get what?"

Another hasty glance, but this time it isn't Kai Beomgyu darts his gaze to, but himself, a quiet, assessing once-over, before he stares resolutely at the table. "Nothing," he mutters. "Nothing. It doesn't matter. The point is, it's my fault. So, I'm sorry you've been saddled with fixing my fuck ups. Again."

There's an edge of nonchalance behind the words, a forced, awful thing that Kai doesn't like the sound of, but can't reprimand. He can't tell Beomgyu how to feel, that's not how any of this works. And he especially can't tell Beomgyu how to feel about *himself.* It would hypocritical. Which means, in the end, between that and the fact that he knows Beomgyu doesn't want his affections, either, he's left with nothing to say at all.

The noodles boil in silence, the air once again only broken by Beomgyu scratching a nail on the surface of the table. Kai casts him furtive little glances now and then, but Beomgyu never returns them, his posture as tense as the atmosphere. He hates this, this stuttered, weighted quiet, too thick and unsteady to breach. He really, really hates it.

The chair squeaks on the tiles while Kai's pouring the noodles into a bowl, and he whips around to see Beomgyu reaching for his crutches. His heart scrambles back into his throat, choking up for a moment before he musters the courage to croak out, "W-wait!"

Beomgyu freezes. He still doesn't look Kai's way, one hand on the back of the chair and his foot braced to the floor like he would run, if he could. His shoulders hunch. "What?"

Someone smarter, Kai reasons, would have actually come up with a justification for their outburst before they said it. Kai is not that person. "Uh, I . . . Um . . . Your leg!" Beomgyu flinches. Fuck. "I- Taehyunie and I are going to try and start working on, uh, fixing it as soon as he's better. I need to, um . . . I need to take measurements . . ."

It's not a total lie, actually. He really does have to do that, although the original intention had been to hunt Beomgyu down and get the numbers in a couple of days. Really, now's as good a time as any, and perhaps an even better one, since Kai is reluctant to just let Beomgyu slip off back into the depths of the ship's living quarters after everything he shared.

Slowly, Beomgyu turns to look at him over his shoulder. He seems to be sizing Kai up, the once-over he gives him assessing and just distrustful enough that Kai has to swallow past a rush of hurt. But the moment passes. Beomgyu nods.

Leaving the bowl of noodles on the counter, Kai quickly crosses the room. Beomgyu still has one hand on the back of his chair, and when Kai moves towards him he braces the other one to the edge of the table, knuckles white and the taut line of his arm trembling. Kai draws up short. "Relax?" he asks softly. "Please? I'm not going to hurt you."

Beomgyu's eyebrows knit together, mouth dropping open for a beat before he purses his lips back together in a frown. "I know that, stupid. You literally used to cry when I made you kill bugs in my room on the arc."

Did he? Kai blinks. ". . . O-oh . . ."

It's always a bit uncanny, learning something like that about himself. Kai's never sure how to feel after such revelations, stunned and discontent in his own faux skin as the truth settles around him like a well-loved blanket his body and mind don't recognize the drape of.

A sigh splits the room, and Kai jolts as Beomgyu sits up a bit straighter and drops his hand from the table to his knee. "Come here, Kai-ya."

Kai goes. He goes as if he's pulled, tripping forward until he's standing awkwardly in front of the other man, fists clenched at his sides as he stares down at him. Beomgyu stares back. "Well? Aren't you going to measure me, or whatever?"

Oh. Right.

Immediately, Kai realizes he's put himself in an uncomfortable position, all things considered. And he knows Beomgyu recognizes that too as soon as Kai drops to his knees before him. His ears ring with the other man's sharp inhale, and the atmosphere is heavy anew. Kai lifts a tentative hand, fingers outstretched towards Beomgyu's right leg. "Can I?"

“. . . Do you . . . *Have to?*” Beomgyu asks weakly, the syllables strained.

“Yeah.” Kai swallows. “I’ll be gentle. I promise.”

“I *know that*-”

Kai barrels on, shaking his head against the interruption. “I- you’ll have to tell me if I’m hurting you, though,” he continues. “I don’t- since I can’t, uh, feel anything, I have a hard time telling if I’m . . . If I’m not . . . Touching someone right. I *try,* but . . .”

He draws off, wilting under the way Beomgyu’s wide eyes rake over him. Again, it’s a sort of assessing gaze, almost vicious in how it seems to strip Kai down to the bone, like Beomgyu’s searching for something he can’t quite find. “*That’s* what you’re worried about?” he asks after another ragged inhale.

“. . . Yes?” Kai hedges. Is there something else that he should be more concerned with?

Beomgyu’s gaze darts away, fixing somewhere over Kai’s head for a long, silent second before he mutters. “Okay.”

Like only those truly blessed with eloquency, Kai answers that with, “Huh?”

“It’s fine,” Beomgyu reiterates, tone barely more than a whisper. “You can . . . It’s fine, you can touch.”

He still doesn’t sound sure, and Kai knows by the way he instantly stiffens the second Kai trails a tentative thumb over the seam of skin where his knee once was that he’s really not. But he doesn’t withdraw the permission, either, so Kai has no reason to act as if he has.

By now, Kai’s more or less used to the way he has to think about every move he makes before he carries it out. He can’t feel the warmth of Beomgyu’s skin under his fingertips, which means he also can’t feel the small tells that might clue him in if he’s doing something wrong. Things like tense muscles and little, unconscious jerks are signs he has to read by sight alone, if he’s able to read them at all. And Beomgyu has always been good at carrying his pain quietly, only voicing or showing it when there’s something to gain, or it's so agonizing he has no choice.

Kai’s careful when he spreads his fingers over the interwoven scars on what remains of Beomgyu’s leg, eyes searching for those minute giveaways that he’s being anything but as he places his thumbs along the diameter of the puckered indent at the base. “Was your last one specialty fitted, or a generic size?”

“Generic,” Beomgyu says quietly. “I’m pretty sure Taehyunie just stole it when we ditched the fleet. It was tall enough, but . . .” There’s no need for him to finish the thought, Kai’s already seen the proof of himself. Even after a week without it, Beomgyu’s leg is still decorated with fading bruises and raw looking chafe marks. Kai shifts to draw his thumbs up vertically, staring at the space between so intensely that he jolts when a hand comes to rest on his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

Blinking, Kai tilts his head up to take in Beomgyu's furrowed brows and cloistered eyes. ". . . Measuring?"

Beomgyu frowns at him. "Without measuring tape?"

Ah. Kai clears his throat, hands returning to his sides as he whispers, "I, um . . . I don't need it anymore. I can just . . . Tell."

Weights, heights, distances, lengths, heart rates, those are all nothing more than numbers for Kai to observe now, simple data his mind logs without his permission. Out of everything, it's what makes him feel the least human, which means that most of the time he's doing his damndest to ignore it.

"And you, what, remember it too?" Beomgyu fills in. "You don't need to write it down?"

"Basically."

The snort that escapes Beomgyu startles him. "Figures. Can't remember being a kid, and in exchange you're now forced to remember *math.*"

Kai quirks a hesitant smile. "Some of us like math."

"*Some of us* are fucking *insane,*" Beomgyu retorts without missing a breath.

It's almost a laugh, the sound that slips out from between Kai's lips, close enough to mistake it for one before it sinks in just how far short it fell. The hand on his shoulder tightens, fingers pressing into the dip beneath Kai's clavicle hard enough to make out the pressure of. And that's a number too, equations whirring in Kai's mind in replace of actual sensation. "Kai-ya . . ." Beomgyu breathes.

Kai ducks his head down, gaze finding one of the smaller scars on Beomgyu's skin. There are so many, he thinks idly, forged constellations of all different shapes and sizes. He trails a thumb over a spot that's still healing, pink at the edges where the skin is pulled taut into a seam in the middle that's still red and new. "Looks like a star," Kai finds himself mumbling without giving it much, if any thought.

Beomgyu chokes on an exhale.

"See?" Using the tip of his finger, Kai draws his way around the five, slightly uneven points. His vision flickers once, twice, when Beomgyu shivers, and after a moment to steel himself, Kai glances up at him, palm flattened over the scar in question.

At the end of the day, Kai's agonizingly aware of how much he's forgotten. The loss makes itself known in the little moments, like this, where he takes in Beomgyu's naked, raw expression and finds himself drowning beneath it because he can't remember if he's ever been looked at like that before. Without the experience to back it up, Kai has no clue how to read such a face, floundering for a second before he shifts his hand, fingers brushing beneath the cut off hem of Beomgyu's pant leg. It doesn't change, not even when Kai curls those same fingers to lightly scratch them down to their original resting spot, nor when he settles

the opposite hand on Beomgyu's knee on the other side. He doesn't know how to feel about it, and as time stretches forwards, Kai isn't sure he's meant to feel anything at all. The hand on his shoulder kneads at him, clenching and unclenching, a disjointed tempo that doesn't match the pulse Kai can register beneath his lifeline, where the starred scar and his own inhuman skin are pressed flush together.

"What are you doing?" At its surface the repeated question seems shallow, but Kai can see how fast Beomgyu is sinking, the way he's dragging in slow, jagged breaths through flared nostrils giving him away. He blinks, not instinctively but *fiercely,* two, three times, before he twists his head to the side to scrub the heel of his palm against his eyes. "Please don't," Beomgyu hitches out, and Kai immediately lets his hands fall away into his lap despite the fact that Beomgyu's fingers on his shoulder only squeeze harder. "Please don't, Kai-ya."

He keeps his upper body turned away, shuddering on inhale after inhale as he struggles to regain some semblance of control, thumb kneading against Kai's clavicle. It's the same way he's always cried, hasty hands desperate to cover up the evidence as if hiding it will make all the mixed emotions that led him to that point disappear, too. The only difference is that, this time, he can't seem to let go of the source of his upset.

It might be easier on him if he could, but when Kai shifts beneath the hand holding on to him, Beomgyu just clenches his fingers around his shoulder tighter.

Maybe that's why Kai asks, pulled in by the dichotomy of Beomgyu's words and his actions. "Can I touch you?" he whispers, hands already shifting from his lap to the seat of the chair Beomgyu's on. "Beomie, can I?"

Beomgyu hiccups in another breath. "Y-yeah."

Kai shuffles forwards on his knees, the chair pulled closer simultaneously before he slips his arms around Beomgyu's middle and tugs him to the edge of the seat. Beomgyu flails, both hands bracing against Kai's shoulders now, a startled, choking sound drawn from his lungs as Kai buries his face against his abdomen. For a second he's sure Beomgyu is going to shove him away, the grip on him tenser than ever, fingers shaking where they're twisted into the seams of Kai's shirt. He drags in another ragged breath, another, another, and then all of his weight is on Kai, slumped over him as he clings on that much more.

"I-I still don't-" He's so hoarse, every syllable broken as he forces them out of his lungs. "I don't want you to- to-"

"You really don't get to decide that," Kai reminds softly, curling his arms tighter around Beomgyu's middle.

"*Kai-ya,*" Beomgyu chokes, "you *can't.* I'm not *worth it.*"

"You don't get to decide *that* either," Kai mutters, uncaring of how vicious the words sound.

Beomgyu shakes his head hard enough to jostle them both with how tangled up they are, chin knocking against Kai's ear as he does it. The disbelief in the action is obvious, the denial

even moreso, signs Kai tries to ignore but can't, proof that a few soft moments are not enough to amend the ache between them. It's a start, though, Kai tells himself. It's a *start.*

He's not sure how long it takes for Beomgyu to push him away, but it does happen, eventually, the other man's shuddering wet inhales and exhales drying up until the hands on his shoulders grow firm enough to ease them apart, let go. It stings despite Kai expecting it, and he sits back on his heels as Beomgyu wipes at his eyes, his cheeks, his nose, gaze averted.

Some things take time. Some things need space. Which is why the next words out of Kai's mouth are a knowing, "Do you want me to go?"

They won't get anywhere by facing down hurdles they aren't ready for, or barriers they can't climb. If anything, they'll only end up hurting each other more. When Beomgyu nods, Kai doesn't fault him for it.

"Okay."

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Taehyun gets better in increments, stretches of time where the results aren't really comparable. His shakiness comes and goes for awhile, as does his drowsiness and nausea, but after three full days he's restless enough that his quiet musings have turned into prying questions. There's a weird light in his eyes Kai doesn't know how to interpret, especially when Taehyun looks up from the tablet he's been playing with at his bedroom desk and says without any fanfare, "You had sex with Yeonjunie, right?"

Sometimes, Kai's glad he has no reason to eat and drink anymore, because if he'd been absentmindedly stress snacking at that moment, he absolutely would have choked to death. As it is he still sputters, flailing with the pieces of Beomgyu's prosthetic he'd been trying to fit together as he fumbles to safely set them down on the bedside table. "Wha- *what!?*"

"When that memory came back," Taehyun clarifies, deadpan in the face of Kai's flustered reaction, "you were having sex, right?"

Kai stares at him, "Uh . . . Not at that *exact second,* no. It was . . ." He grimaces, unsure of how much he wants to reveal, guilt still heavy in his chest about the matter. "It was, um, a bit after . . ."

"You're sure?"

He's not, actually. Kai frowns. "Pretty sure . . ."

Humming under his breath, Taehyun's fingers fly across the surface of the tablet. "Next question: what kind of sex was it?"

"Taehyunie, *what the fuck?*"

Taehyun glances up at him, blinking owlishly in the low light of his bedroom for a moment before he says, "I have a hypothesis."
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“About the side effects of *anal?*” Kai mutters. “Seriously, what the fuck?”

Kai slaps a hand to his face as Taehyun taps at the tablet again, apparently writing that little tidbit down, too.

“Not specifically, no. I just have a few theories, and if I want to test them I need some specifics. Now, question three: how did you feel afterwards?”

“Terrible,” Kai snaps before he can think better of it.

He knows it’s a mistake even as the retort is leaving his mouth, and his whole body locks up as Taehyun lifts his head to stare at him with furrowed brows. “Oh . . . *Kai-ya* . . .”

“Don’t,” Kai pleads, “say my name like that. What happened with Yeonjun-ah was . . . It won’t happen again. It was a selfish *mistake.* I don’t want pity, or empathy or whatever, for the stupid things I've done. Especially not that.”

Taehyun’s still staring at him, lips parted like he means to say something more before he purses them shut and sucks in a heavy breath through his nose. “I wasn’t pitying you,” he whispers. “I just . . . I don’t know. I don’t know what I felt. I’m sorry.”

Oh. Great. Kai sighs and runs a hand through his hair, an old restless motion that does little to soothe his rattled insides. “It’s fine. But I . . . I don’t want to talk about it. Or think about it, really.”

“I’m sorry,” Taehyun repeats. “I’ll stop, then. There’s no point if you’re not comfortable . . .” He draws off as he sets his tablet down on the desk, one leg pulled up onto the chair as he fixes his gaze to whatever he’d been recording on the device.

The room is quiet for a moment, and while the silence that settles isn’t particularly uncomfortable, Kai feels tense in the midst of it regardless. He’s fairly certain he knows where Taehyun was going with his questions, and even though he’s almost positive that’s not what triggered it, he can’t help but voice the unspoken idea anyways. “You think sex might have reawakened the memory.”

He’s surprised when Taehyun scoffs, enough so that he jumps a bit where he’s sitting on the bed. “God, no,” Taehyun mutters. “I thought physical affection had. Which includes, but is not limited to sex.”

Kai quirks an eyebrow high, “Then why did you start with asking about sex specifically.”

He’s not a huge fan of the incredulous look Taehyun gives him. “Kai-ya,” he says, just carefully enough that Kai’s hackles start to rise at the tone, “I’m not an idiot. I know sex is important to you.”

It’s as if someone reached inside him and grabbed hold of his ribs, Kai decides as the shock and agony bleeds through him, like Taehyun had pulled him apart and gripped his once human heart with his bare hands. Whatever expression he’s wearing must be awful, because the noise Taehyun lets out when he takes it in makes everything hurt that much worse. Kai

shys away from the brunt of it, shuffling back on the bed until his shoulders hit the wall, eyes turning to the sheets rumpled between his feet. Fuck, what is *that* supposed to mean? And what does it matter? It's not like it's something Kai can have anymore, not really, so there's no use dwelling on it. There's no point, there's no-

"Kai-ya."

Maybe it was, once. When Kai was still human. He can't really deny that. Even with only the six years of memories left to him, Kai knows there's ample truth to Taehyun's assumption. That's why he had the tendency to seek it out before missions, why he'd remodeled The Endolphin with six bedrooms instead of the logical five, why he used to make up stupid excuses like stargazing on the bridge just to cuddle up close and have wandering hands lead to inevitable destinations. And it's *exactly* why he'd clung to Yeonjun that night, aching for something he craved but could no longer grasp, convincing himself he could live with just the shadow of it.

"*Kai-ya.*"

Thumbs soothe over his cheeks, fingers gliding into his hair, pressing and pulling just hard enough that Kai's able to register the outline of it and lean into the touch. "You know that's fine, right?" Taehyun murmurs as he crowds into Kai's space, close enough that Kai has to shift to accommodate him, arms and legs parting from their curled up positions to let him in. "You're allowed to want those things."

There's a difference, Kai thinks bleakly as he loops his arms around Taehyun's shoulders, thunks his head down into the crook of the other man's neck, between wanting something and being able to have it. And with the way things are now, that difference is insurmountable. "It doesn't matter," Kai whispers, "if I want it. None of that matters. You get that, right?" He can't help it, the way he wants to instinctively slump further into Taehyun's hold, cling to him tighter, an inescapable, intrinsic need that can't be sated rising in him until it leaves his lips in a noise that treads too close to a whimper, his vision flickering as he buries his face against the side of Taehyun's throat. "Taehyunie," he chokes, "I can't feel *anything.*"

They'll never understand that, Kai knows. There's no way they can. The disconnect between his mind and his body, his remaining memories of what being human was like and the existence he lives now, it's impossible for someone human to fully comprehend. Kai could spend the rest of his life explaining the foreign, phantom sensation that only sparks through his faux skin beneath the hardest of touches, and they would still barely be able to even imagine the anguish of it.

He flinches when Taehyun presses a palm to his chest, the pressure he puts into the motion deliberate enough that Kai understands the wordless urge. He lifts his head to put a breath of space between them, eyes squeezed shut so Taehyun can't see the unsteady light in them.. "Kai-ya," Taehyun murmurs, hands raising instead to cradle Kai's face. "Listen-"

"Please don't," Kai croaks, and *oh,* isn't that a familiar overture.

He wonders, just for a second, if Beomgyu knows, if he's ever realized.

They're both caught in the same, agonizing trap, scared of the potential promise of things they've lost, terrified of the inevitable hurt if they get their hopes up for something that might forever be out of reach.

Kai does not want to hear how Taehyun thinks he can be "fixed," not when the chances of it happening are so infinitesimally small. He's already tasted what it would be like to have his sense of touch back, and that nearly killed him *and* everyone he loves. It's not worth it. *He's not worth it.*

"Listen-" Taehyun starts again, and Kai almost bites him, anger flashing through him fierce and fast it nearly overwhelms him in all the worst ways. He shoves, hands knocking harshly against Taehyun's ribs, his sternum, but Taehyun doesn't let go. If anything, he just hangs on harder, shifting his grip from Kai's face to his shoulders with a grunt. "Kai-ya, listen! I'm not wrong! Listen to me! Everything points to it! We just need to-"

Kai pushes him again, practically flailing now to escape, flee both the room and the conversation because he can't do this, he *can't.* He can't let himself chase something that's probably only a daydream, he'll never recover from that.

He's surprised, then, when Taehyun manages to grab both his hands, a low, frustrated sound snapping through the air before he swings himself around and plants a knee against Kai's stomach. Kai goes down without a sound, wide-eyed and frozen as Taehyun pins his arms over his head and says through his teeth, "You know what, I'm done."

". . . Done?" Kai whispers weakly, stricken now for entirely different reasons. Done with what? With this situation? With *Kai?*

"I've been babying you," Taehyun spits, "letting you grieve. I thought that was what was best, and kept my thoughts to myself. But now you're just hurting yourself, Kai. And I can't watch you do that anymore. You talk about 'trying,' but you refuse to 'try' for *you.* You're only looking out for everyone else, when you're *part of us.* So now you *have to* listen to me."

Taehyun's always been the most physically strong out of all of them, but Kai's still shocked when he tries to buck him off and Taehyun merely moves to sit across his chest, nostrils flaring as he glares down at him as if Kai doesn't weigh nearly twice as much as him now. "Please-" Kai begs. It's not fair. It's *cruel.* If Taehyun gives him hope, and it's not real, Kai will never get over it, and Taehyun has to know that. He *has to,* because he knows the kind of person Kai is.

"Kai-ya," Taehyun says, the syllables measured, "you're warm where I touch you."

Kai stills mid frantic squirm, eyes snapping open to blink up at where Taehyun is glowering down at him. That was . . . Not even remotely the direction he thought this was going. "Huh?"

"Your skin gets warm when you're touched," Taehyun goes on. "Most of the time."

Most of the time . . .

Taehyun lifts his hands away from Kai's wrists, fingers trailing over the places he gripped with a sigh. "You're cold right now. Because I'm being mean. Because what I'm doing right now isn't . . . It's not . . . Good. But most of the time, when someone is touching you, you're warm."

Kai stares, swallowing around the ghost of a lump in his throat. "I- I don't understand . . ."

Thumbs trace over his cheeks, under his eyes, down the sides of his nose to the seam of his lips where Kai's pressed them firmly together. "You warm up when you're touched by people who love you."

Panic rockets through Kai's entire body like an inferno. "I'm *hurting* you," he gasps, horrified. "Get off, Taehyun, you shouldn't-"

"You're not hurting me," Taehyun soothes. "It's not hot like when you were flaring. It's just . . . Warm."

"It's *radiation*-"

Taehyun shrugs, and Kai flails again, smacking a palm to the other man's chest to try and dislodge him, an action that only makes Taehyun grab the offending hand and tangle their fingers together. What *the fuck.* "If it is, it's not enough to burn, which means it's fine."

"For *now,*" Kai retorts, "but in the long run-"

"What," Taehyun counters smoothly, "we might lose a couple years? Ten? Out of the average human lifespan we were never going to reach the end of anyways? So in the off chance I get to retire to some far flung beach planet, I'll die at sixty instead of seventy? I'll take it. If it means I'll spend all of those years with you, I'll *take it,* Kai-ya."

Someone's definitely torn Kai's heart out. Or, well, they've torn it out again. That burning bright light of alien technology surely isn't whirring around inside him anymore, because Kai feels *hollow.*

"*Taehyun-ah . . .*"

Taehyun's other hand fits around his jaw, fingers threading into the faux caramel strands of Kai's hair. "I really do think we can fix this," he murmurs, so sure sounding that it rings between them like a promise. "No, I *know* we can. You're warm where we touch, Kai-ya."

He doesn't ask, not with words anyways, but Kai can read the way Taehyun pauses, tilts his head, a silent beg for permission, and nods.

Kissing Taehyun has always been a little bit different from kissing the others. Maybe it's the fact that he's more attracted to emotions rather than physical attributes, but Taehyun has always loved with an attentiveness that leaves Kai aching. It makes his head spin even now, when he can't feel it, dizzy as Taehyun presses their lips together once, twice, before he parts them to murmur, "See, you're warming up already."

Kai hiccups, “I *can't*-” His hands clench where they’ve risen to fist at the back of Taehyun’s shirt, that awful, anguished desperation he can’t quench choking him. “*Taehyunie* . . .”

“Then I’ll tell you,” Taehyun swears. He shifts, trailing kisses from Kai’s lips to his cheek, over the bridge of his nose and back down the other side, retreading familiar paths down to the line of his jaw, his throat. “You’re so warm, Kai-ya. Everywhere. Everywhere that I show you how much I love you. Here,” he mouths another kiss to Kai’s adam’s apple, something Kai only knows because he doesn’t dare close his eyes, helplessly clawing through his own body just to find those barely there tells; a hint of pressure, a registered number of weight, the scattered values of the heartbeat beneath his palms. “Here,” Taehyun whispers, at the tender dip between Kai’s clavicles. His hands skate down Kai’s ribs as he shimmies lower, fingers tracing out the once human bones one at a time. “Here, and here, and *here.*”

He shivers, and for a stricken moment Kai thinks his worst fears have come true, that he’s *hurting him,* but Taehyun ducks down as it ripples through him, merely pressing closer with a contented sigh. “*Oh,* and- and on my back, too, where your hands- I-” He hums under the next exhale he breathes out, soft, *happy,* another kiss practically purred against the curve of Kai’s neck. “You’re warm where you love me, too.”

Kai wants to cry, wants to scream and sob and wail until his body hurts, until all the aches festing inside him manifest into something physical he can *feel.* But he can’t. All he has is this, a tentative hope that, just like he knew he would, he grasps onto the threads of anyways.

Taehyun huffs when Kai flips them, wide-eyed and startled for a moment before Kai clashes their mouths together. “It feels good?” Kai asks, the words hoarse, scared even as Taehyun all but melts against him, arching into every kiss and touch Kai peppers him with. “Really? You’re sure?”

“Yeah,” Taehyun pants. “*Yeah.* It does. You’re warm, Kai-ya. You’re so- everything is so-” He cuts himself off with a breathless laugh peters off into an equally breathless whine. “God, this is so *stupid.* But I really do think that it’s- that it’s *true.*”

It takes a second for Kai to register the confession, or care about it rather, too busy marking up the same paths on Taehyun’s skin that were just carved on his own, cheeks, throat, collarbones, nose. Taehyun snickers and sighs, threading his hands back into Kai’s hair to keep him close. “What’s true?” Kai finally asks.

“That love is going to fix you.”

Kai snorts, “You’re right. That is stupid.”

“Stupid and *true,*” Taehyun insists. He hooks a leg around Kai’s waist, smirking as he rolls him so they’re laying side by side, wandering fingers stroking up under Kai’s shirt to dance along the knobs of his spine. “Love makes you human, Kai-ya. Love brought you back to us.”

Kai frowns, the expression quickly dispersed when Taehyun leans in to kiss it off his face. “This isn’t a fairytale, Taehyunie,” he whispers when Taehyun has to part for air.

“Maybe not,” Taehyun agrees. “But how else do you explain this? When I was rough with you, when I was doing something you didn’t want, you were cold. But now . . .”

He’s so flushed, Kai notes, thumbs trailing over the pink tinge in Taehyun’s cheeks down to where it’s just starting to tint his neck, eyes finding the gentle, pleased curve of the other man’s kiss-swollen lips. His hands can’t feel it, but he can *see* it, all the places where he’s touched him, and Taehyun’s body has reacted as if Kai is still flesh and blood.

“You’re warm,” Taehyun repeats, hushed, as if saying it is all it takes to spell it into reality, “you’re so warm, wherever you’re loved.”

Kai swallows.

“Do you remember your first kiss, Kai-ya?”

“You know I don’t,” Kai returns, barely audible as renewed grief grips him. “Why? Was it you?”

Taehyun smiles, soft, his eyes half lidded as he cards a hand through Kai’s hair and slots their bodies closer together, legs tangling as Kai lifts an arm to drag him in until they’re pressed chest to chest. “No,” Taehyun admits. “But you were mine.”

Oh.

“I was?”

“Mm.” Taehyun nuzzles their noses against each other, another kiss butterflied to the corner of Kai’s mouth. “We were sixteen, and I was so scared we’d all end up assigned to different ships. I goaded you into it, saying I didn’t want to die without ever having kissed anyone, but I think you knew that was mostly a lie.”

“You just wanted to kiss me,” Kai surmises slyly, pleased when Taehyun barks out a laugh.

“Don’t get a big head, I wanted to kiss a few people, but you were one of them. And I knew you wouldn’t make fun of me.”

It’s still strange, having someone describe something that must have been a pivotal moment in his own life to him in this manner, but Kai finds that he doesn’t mind it as much as he had before. He sighs, curling his arms tight around Taehyun’s waist as he presses a kiss of his own to the other man’s throat. If he closes his eyes, he can almost picture it, the both of them young and terrified of a war they’d grown up in, a fate that was already sealed, seeking comfort in the only certainties they had.

Taehyun digs his fingers into his shoulder blades to keep him close, hard enough that Kai knows he’s making sure he understands. “It was nice,” he continues, the words breathed against Kai’s ear. “And it was . . . It was a lot like this; new and overwhelming. I thought I was going to cry.”

“You tasted like toothpaste.”

Kai doesn't realize he's said it until Taehyun stiffens in his arms, breath catching as the room grows silent around them. A palm eases between their bodies, and Kai blinks as Taehyun pulls away just to stare at him with eyes the size of saucers. ". . . Kai?"

"I-" Kai starts, stumbles, stunned. "I- you tasted like toothpaste. I thought it was funny, because it was so obvious you'd been psyching yourself up for it. I think I . . . I laughed at you?"

Taehyun nods, slow, slightly uncertain, blinking as tears start to well in his eyes. "You did, but you tried to hold it in. I was scared you were teasing me . . ."

"No," Kai denies immediately. "No, *never.* It was so cute. Oh! And I gave you a hickey! You smacked me for that!"

"You didn't ask first!"

"I was sixteen and hormonal!"

"I had to go to class the next morning with a turtleneck on!" Taehyun snaps. "A turtleneck, Kai-ya!"

It seems to hit them at the same time, the gravity of the situation, the elation, and Taehyun's offended huffs give way to a sob simultaneous to when Kai rolls them over again to bury his face against the crook of Taehyun's neck. "I knew it," Taehyun hiccups, tears dripping freely down his cheeks now. "*I knew it.*"

Kai trembles. "It's just the one," he chokes out. "Just that one memory. But I- that might- Taehyunie, that might be it. That might be all it ever is. I only got the one with Yeonjunie, too, what if . . ."

He's shaking when Taehyun kisses the shell of his ear, hands kneading at the other man's back. Desperately, he hopes that he's warm. "It won't be," Taehyun swears. "*It won't be,* Kai-ya. I know it."

"How do you know?" Kai whispers. Even if he is right, he has no way of knowing that. Maybe, Kai's missing memories are finite. There's no proof they're all still there somewhere inside his head, there's always a possibility that he only has these few. And yet . . .

And yet.

"I know," Teahyun says steadily, "because I love you. I *love you,* Kai-ya."

And yet, maybe it's just that easy afterall. Not finite, but *infinite,* something Kai's had the whole time, intangible and fierce and *there,* waiting to be stoked back into life with all the same burning ardor it had once held. When said aloud it sounds so silly, not enough like science and just a little bit like magic.

But, well, love was never very scientific in the first place, was it.

"I love you, too."

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone hasn't read my other stuff, I always write Taehyun as demisexual.

Anywho, if you've enjoyed the chapter, please leave a comment! I love reading them, even if I don't always have time to reply to each and every one. They really do make me strive to keep this story going lmao, since it's such a rough one to write (believe me, if you were crying reading it, I was probably also crying writing it lmao).

Chapter 8: Eight

Chapter Summary

> Kai summons Endolphin in the darkness just for the glow of her company, the illusion of not being alone, and lets his head drop into his hands. He chokes on a sound that's as close to a sob as his body will allow.
>
> "Am I stupid?" he asks her once he's sure he has the voice to, the question trembling in the air, hoarse and hitched. "If I can't feel anything, is it stupid of me to want that stuff anyways?"
>
> He sinks further into himself when she says, matter of fact, "Want is a human emotion."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Stardate: 15.11.22. Location: Eridanus II. Um . . ."

Normally, Taehyun doesn't record The Endolphin's logs, and it shows. He seems to trip over every syllable, though Kai can't tell if that's due to the inexperience, or the exhaustion. It's probably both.

"Three days ago we defected from the fleet. I . . . I debated whether or not these logs were even necessary anymore, but I think . . . I think it's a good idea. For historical purposes at least."

He laughs then, a bitter, strained thing, almost hysterical.

"Don't misunderstand, I don't have any grand delusions that we'll end up doing anything of merit now, if we ever would have at all. But I . . . I want to leave something behind, I guess, some sort of proof that I was here."

A breath heaves out of him, his stiff, professional posture slumping forward in his seat as he chokes on the inhale and buries his face in his hands.

"I think . . . I think we're going to lose Beomgyu, too."

Kai skips ahead.

"Stardate: 15.11.26. Location: Phoenix Dwarf."

It's Taehyun again, somehow managing to look even worse for wear than before. This time, he doesn't even try to lift his eyes to the camera. There's a weariness to his posture that

makes Kai ache.

“His fever won’t break, I don’t know what to do. I-”

He’s shaking, a barely there tremble the camera almost doesn’t pick up.

“I’m scared it’s going to burn him away, if it hasn’t already. I don’t . . . I don’t know what to ***do*** *.”*

Again, Kai presses on, flipping through log dates on the glass tablet clutched between his hands.

“Stardate: 15.11.30. Location: Pisces V.”

A smile tugs at one corner of Taehyun’s mouth, faint but real. A spark of hope.

“Beomie woke up today. His fever's persistent, but it’s lower. He said my name.”

He scrubs a hand over his dry eyes, across red and raw cheeks that are already starting to sallow. Exhaustion lingers heavy around the motion, preserved in the amber of The Endolphin’s recorded logs.

“Yeonjun’s arm is getting better, too. But I still can’t let him out of bed. The blaster shot barely missed his axillary artery, and it burned through his scapula. It’s a miracle he made it back onto the ship without bleeding out. He needs to keep resting, let it heal. I also . . . Soobin ate this morning. Just a little. So . . . So that’s good. I was starting to worry I’d end up on the ship all alone . . .”

Kai turns the tablet off.

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The low creak and groan of machinery is the only sound in the medbay as Taehyun fits the new prosthetic to Beomgyu’s leg. He adjusts it in silence, face only centimeters away from where metal meets skin with his rarely worn glasses slipping down the end of his nose. Kai observes over his shoulder for awhile before he ultimately ends up looking at Beomgyu, carefully watching his face for any signs of discomfort.

He hasn’t said a word since they started, lips pressed firmly together and his eyes fixed on the stiff sheets of the bed he’s perched on the edge of. His hands fist at his sides, twisting the fabric of the thin blue blanket beneath him, and Kai sets a warning palm to Taehyun’s shoulder.

Taehyun stops, brows furrowing as he glances up at Beomgyu. “Does it hurt?”

To Kai’s exasperation, Beomgyu just shakes his head, the thin line of his mouth unwavering.

“Beomgyu-ya,” Taehyun whispers.

Somehow, that only seems to make things worse.
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“It’s fine,” Beomgyu grits out between his teeth.

It isn’t. Kai stares at him for a long, tense second, a gaze Beomgyu studiously avoids, and soothes a thumb over the back of Taehyun’s neck.

Beomgyu glowers at the both of them.

When Taehyun gets back to work, his movements are more deliberate, only a minute passing before he twists something into place and Beomgyu hiccups on a startled, obviously pained gasp. One of his hands fumbles free of the bedding beneath him, flailing for something more solid, only to freeze as his fingers end up clasping around Kai’s as they’re offered.

“Did *that* hurt?” Taehyun asks, eyebrow arched like he’s daring Beomgyu to lie to him again.

Stubborn, Kai thinks ruefully. They’re both so fucking stubborn.

“. . . Yes,” Beomgyu manages through a staggered breath.

His hand squeezes around Kai’s. Taehyun levels him with a narrow-eyed, challenging expression, and gets back to it.

Even though the state of Beomgyu’s leg is technically a medical condition, Kai still finds the whole procedure to be a bit too clinical. Now that they’ve managed to get Beomgyu to actually speak, Taehyun continues fitting the prosthetic with interspersed questions, some of which he types the responses to in a tablet he has balanced across his knees. There’s a lot to ask, apparently, inquiries about everything from pain to balance once he makes Beomgyu stand and try taking a few steps, Kai’s hand still gripped tight between his shaking fingers. And then they start all over again.

Stand. Step. Adjust. Stand. Step. Adjust. A slow circuit between medbay beds as Beomgyu quietly lets himself be examined. Eventually though Taehyun seems satisfied, a pleased smile curling his lips when Beomgyu paces from one side of the room to the other, back and forth twice before he lets go of Kai to try it on his own. “How does that fit?” Taehyun asks. “Better?”

For a moment, Kai almost doesn’t think Beomgyu will deign to answer. He stares at Taehyun from where he’s paused a ways away, face purposefully neutral. “Yeah."

“Make sure to let me know if it starts hurting,” Taehyun says, “if it’s chafing or bruising again. Kai-ya designed it to be more versatile with the ways it can be adjusted than your old model, so please . . .”

“I will,” Beomgyu mumbles, and Kai can tell that Taehyun doesn’t quite believe him. “Can I go now?”

He’s practically already out the door when Taehyun finally nods, slipping through before it’s even finished hissing open and ducking away into the too bright hallways of the ship. Kai

waits until he's gone to hold his hand out, palm up, the one Beomgyu had clung to for most of the last hour.

Taehyun blinks at it briefly, and then takes it in his own to run a reverent finger down the recreated lifeline curving across the center. "It's warm," he murmurs, two simple words that almost make Kai's knees buckle out from under him, the soft confirmation nearly as powerful as it had been weeks ago now, when Beomgyu had confessed them in the confines of the airlock.

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"So it's love, then?" Yeonjun whispers, sounding as incredulous as Kai feels. Regardless, Kai nods.

They're sprawled out together on his bed the wrong way around, one of Kai's feet propped up amidst a small mound of stuffed animals at the base of the headboard. "That's what Taehyunie thinks," he says after a pause to gather his thoughts. There really isn't another way to explain it, as ridiculous as that sounds. "He said physical affection is probably the easiest method to trigger it, though we haven't exactly been able to prove that for certain yet."

Yeonjun hums under his breath, gaze distant as he props himself up on an elbow to draw incongruent shapes over Kai's chest. The touch wrinkles the fabric of his t-shirt, never straying low or high enough to be anything more than chaste. Kai swallows around nothing. "We don't have to do anything," he adds.

Part of him was expecting this, the wariness, but it still stings when Yeonjun doesn't meet his eyes. "I want to help you," he says, and Kai doesn't miss the dissonance that echoes in the depths of his words.

"You don't have to."

"I *want* to," Yeonjun protests, finally meeting his gaze. He looks determined, the frown marring his features steady, but the hands that have moved to splay over the sides of Kai's ribs press against him just a little too hard. It would be painful, if Kai were human, the grip an obvious indicator of how much Yeonjun is trying to keep himself together.

They hurt each other, Kai reminds himself grimly, used each other, and he can see how much that's still weighing on Yeonjun's mind in the way he holds himself.

There's a very, very real possibility that what happened between them is irreparable, a wound that won't be healed so long as anything they do together can't be truly mutual. And, unfortunately, Kai's able to confirm that pretty quickly.

Yeonjun tangles them up together when he leans down to kiss him. The initial slide of their mouths together is hesitant, stilted, only soothed into something more normal when Kai surges up to clutch him closer. The little sigh Yeonjun gasps out makes everything inside him thrill, the proof that he's able to make the other man feel good as close to pleasure as he can have in the detached void of his own body.
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Kai's the first one to tilt his head away, seek out well loved destinations, his lips trailing over the hinge of Yeonjun's jaw, the line of his throat. He scrapes his teeth over skin, teasing a whine from his partner's lungs, and skates a hand up under the hem of the other man's shirt to follow the arch of his spine. When Yeonjun guides him back home, drags him where he's meant to be, their noses brushing together between a murmured affection, Kai sits up and slides a thigh between Yeonjun's legs.

It's like second nature, subconscious, memory seeking out the steps of familiar dance. And for a moment, Yeonjun responds beautifully, panting against Kai's mouth as his hips jerk against the offered friction, once, twice, before his eyes snap open and he rears back as if struck.

Kai barely manages to keep him from tumbling over the side of the bed. He's fucked up. He *knows* he's fucked up, the wide, wild stare Yeonjun looks at him with as his chest heaves in shallow breaths unmistakable.

"Kai-ya . . ."

"I'm sorry," Kai blurts out, stricken. "I'm sorry -*fuck*- I'm so-"

"It's okay," Yeonjun whispers, too hoarse.

"It isn't-"

"It's fine, Kai-ya. I just . . ."

There's so much he could say here that Kai would accept, a hundred explanations that would be totally justified and then some. But, "I can't use you," was not one of them.

Agony claws through all that's left of Kai, swift, cold. "What?"

Yeonjun bites his lip, hooded eyes distant as he strokes an apologetic hand over the back of Kai's neck. "I used you, last time. You didn't get anything out of it, and that wasn't right."

"*Yeonjun-ah,* that's . . . This isn't like last time. You're not-"

"I don't want to do that again. It's . . . Too much. I can't take pleasure in that, baby. That sort of stuff . . . It should be for the both of us, you know? And it's not. Not like this."

"But-"

His rebuttal is cut off, dying on his tongue when he takes in the way Yeonjun's mouth trembles, the tears in the corners of his eyes. Oh *god.* "I'm sorry," he chokes out, an echo of Kai's own stumbled apologies. "*I'm sorry,* I just . . . It makes me feel *sick,* Kai-ya, like I'm taking *advantage* of you, and-"

It's not like that, Kai wants to protest, faux heart climbing into his throat. It doesn't matter if he doesn't get any pleasure out of it. He just wants to make Yeonjun feel good.

But it does matter. It matters to *Yeonjun,* and Kai squeezes his eyes shut and wills himself not to shake apart at the seams as he watches a line get drawn in the sand between them.

Yeonjun sags into his arms with an awful, wet hitch of breath, shuddering kisses pressed to Kai's shoulder as he clings to him, fingers fisted tight in the back of his shirt.

"Okay," Kai whispers, acceptance bitter as it winds its way into all the places he's still sore, tired. "It's okay. This is . . . This is enough."

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Touch starvation is a very real phenomenon. Children can *die* of it when they're young, unable to grow and survive without warmth and affection. But Kai isn't a child, and he's not really a human, either.

He passes Soobin on his way to the bridge, their eyes meeting for barely a second before the captain averts his gaze, and then he's gone.

Kai can't be starving, he reasons, if he's technically already dead.

The bridge is quiet late at night, the ship left to lull with her shields up and her occupants safely tucked away in some far-out galaxy Kai doesn't bother to look up the name of. All the consoles are still on, tiny beeps and whirs filling the deck as the systems that can't be turned off continue working tirelessly, a constant tether that holds the five of them suspended in the empty nothingness between stars. Kai sits on the step leading down, his back to the hall, and stares out at the black beyond.

It's funny, really, that it took him this long to find all the places where the disconnect between his mind and body feels too visceral to fully acknowledge.

Kai summons Endolphin in the darkness just for the glow of her company, the illusion of not being alone, and lets his head drop into his hands. He chokes on a sound that's as close to a sob as his body will allow.

"Am I stupid?" he asks her once he's sure he has the voice to, the question trembling in the air, hoarse and hitched. "If I can't feel anything, is it stupid of me to want that stuff anyways?"

He sinks further into himself when she says, matter of fact, "Want is a human emotion."

It is, isn't it. A faulty fractal in the grand design. The Gigye don't *want,* they operate on a basis of need. And Kai doesn't *need* anything, really. He's self sufficient, a conscious creation that will eventually burn out so many millennia from now that everything he's trying so desperately to keep ahold of will be nothing more than stardust and memory.

But, god, he *wants.*

"I'm selfish," he whimpers into his hands, eyes kept shut so he doesn't have to see the sight of the bridge flicker, fade, as he shudders apart. "I'm so fucking *selfish.* I'm hurting Yeonjunie, asking for too much, but I still . . ."
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She doesn't understand, she can't. She's not human, either.

"Do you want me to get someone for you?" Endolphin asks quietly. Relief seeps into Kai's bones even as he shakes his head, grateful for the programmed tone of concern despite the knowledge that he put it there in the first place. "What should I do?"

Now isn't that a question. "Nothing," Kai admits.

The worst part, he decides, is that he's terrified that Yeonjun is right. It's not like he's forgotten, that awful, heavy, post coital anguish and self loathing still seared into his mind. But the thought of letting that rule him is somehow worse. It tastes too much like giving up, like letting go of something he's not ready to lose.

His body can't age, can't fall ill, but Kai somehow feels older than he ever has, sick at his very core.

He feels *wrong.*

"Beomgyu-ya is awake," Endolphin says abruptly.

Kai lifts his head from his hands. "What?"

She swims through the air around him, tail swishing up and down as she glides into his line of sight. "It's late, but Beomgyu-ya is still awake."

He's not sure what her intention is, telling him this, and Kai stares at her for a long suspended second as the words sink in, confusion roiling through him.

"Beomie doesn't want to see me," he whispers.

Endolphin tilts her head. "How do you know?"

Time flows weirdly when you can't sleep, hours either ticking by too slow, or blurring past in the space between one blink and the next. Kai closes his eyes, shaking on all the breaths he can't take, can't feel, and finds himself standing outside Beomgyu's room, his hand lifted to knock but frozen just short. It's stuck in the same damn place as the rest of him, halfway there with nowhere to turn back to.

He's not sure how long he stands there, poised on a decision partially made, but after awhile he tamps down against the incessant shiver inside him and lowers his arm back to his side.

This is, of course, the exact moment the door slides open.

Kai doesn't know what time it is, but it's late enough by the ship's clocks that Beomgyu's hair is mussed, a pillow crease on his cheek. He stares at Kai through bleary eyes for a long, disquieted second before he breathes out a thick exhale through his nose and shifts aside. It's not a very obvious gesture, and Kai stands there in the wake of it for a beat too long, Beomgyu's frown deepening as he mutters, "Either come in, or go. Decide."

So Kai steps forward.

Beomgyu doesn't have his prosthetic on, and Kai notes that he rose to open the door without his crutches, either. He maneuvers back to bed on his own, practiced ease evident in every movement as his hands find sturdy purchases on the furniture around him without so much as a glance. Another weighted breath escapes his lungs when he sits down on the edge of the mattress, the door sliding shut at Kai's back. The atmosphere feels off, somehow, different from the last time Kai had taken shelter in this room, tense in a way he can't decipher. Beomgyu doesn't look at him, not really, the fleeting glances he does cast Kai's direction never quite rising high enough to do more than catch a glimpse of his shoulder, his neck, his chest, anything but his face.

He should say something, Kai thinks desperately as Beomgyu's discomfort grows more and more apparent. Why the hell did he even come here if he's not going to say anything?

The bed creaks as Beomgyu shuffles back on it, one hand fumbling to find the blankets puddled at the end and tug them up around his shoulders before he flops over onto his side with a huff.

Yeah, now would be the ideal time to leave, Kai thinks. He should have never come here in the first place. It was stupid of him, foolish longing and heartache manifesting into yet another desolate decision.

He blinks as Beomgyu lifts an arm, the edge of the blankets with it, and keeps it aloft.

The offer is clear, but Kai's whole body still locks up with shock, tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and his vision flickering in and out as he takes it in. He should say something. *One of them* should say *something.*

Neither of them do.

Kai crawls beneath the raised arm, the shelter of the blankets, and says nothing at all. He curls up on his side, blinking in the low lavender light that spills over the man beside him, pooling in starlit cascades through his dark hair and tired, half-lidded eyes, and stays quiet.

Everything feels fragile, porcelain inhales and exhales, glass skin. Kai reaches out to mirror the touch that's settled around his ribs, draping a tentative arm over Beomgyu's waist. The hum of The Endolphin's engines is almost too loud now, cacophonous in his ears and drowning out the staccato tempo of Beomgyu's heart. He still doesn't meet Kai's eyes, even as they curl closer together, face tilting away and into the pillow instead when Kai draws them against each other until he almost feels whole. But he doesn't push him away either, the even rise and falls of his chest unfaltering, slow, sleep slipping into the heavy silence.

Kai stays awake, empty beside him, but a little less starved.

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Beomgyu climbs over him come morning.

He's not rude about it, careful as he moves Kai's arm from his waist and rises, the blankets tucked back around his body as if Kai could ever possibly be chilled. Kai rolls over beneath
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the sheets to watch him through the slowly brightening lights of their living quarters.

It's obvious that Beomgyu has settled into a routine, moving through the room minus either prosthetic or crutches without mishap. He plops down in his chair in front of the desk, quiet as he brushes through his hair and squints at himself in the little mirror perched on the edge of the surface. Steady hands gather it out of his eyes and pull it back into a loose ponytail before he seems satisfied enough to kick away from the desk to scoot towards the dresser beside it.

There are two piles of folded pants in the bottom drawer when Beomgyu pulls it out, those with both legs intact, and those where the right one has been cut off. For the first time, Kai has to wonder if that decision is one of comfort, or spite, and decides he doesn't really want to know. Either way, Beomgyu gathers his clothes and heads back to the bed.

He doesn't pay Kai any mind when he leans over him to hoist his prosthetic out of its charging stand, and they don't speak when he sits beside him to put it on and get dressed, grumbling through the process.

It's almost like Kai isn't even there at all, a ghost haunting a space he doesn't belong in. He rolls back over as that thought grips him, curling in on himself and fixing his attention on the wall.

A hand reaches across the bed to tuck the blankets in again, carefully folding them back into the places where they've slipped free from being pressed around Kai's frame.

Beomgyu's gone by the time Kai forces himself to check, the door hissing shut behind him as he departs.

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"Stardate: 15.12.5. Location: Leo T."

As the ship's captain, recording the daily logs is one of Soobin's duties, and the way he normally sits in front of the camera tends to display that. Kai's used to seeing a professional posture, a straight back and a steady expression. But the Soobin he remembers is nowhere to be seen. On the screen of his tablet, Soobin slumps, elbows on the table and his hands folded together, white knuckled where he rests his forehead against them.

"Taehyun hit his head."

He shudders on a breath, and Kai is thankful, suddenly, that he hasn't lifted his head enough for the camera to capture his expression.

The recording stops.

"Stardate: 15.12.7. Location: Eridanus II."

This time, Soobin props himself up a little straighter. It's not much of a change, the rest of his posture almost identical to the log from two days prior. But his eyes are visible over the
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tangle of his hands, empty enough to swallow starlight whole. Kai grips the tablet so hard the glass whines ominously between his palms.

“Taehyun hasn’t thrown up for twelve hours, and Beomgyu’s fever broke.”

It’s direct, to the point and nothing more. The recording cuts again.

Kai lets go of the tablet to try and steady himself, drawing his knees up to his chest and letting his head drop atop the slope of them.

He isn't aware of how many minutes slide by before he’s able to pick it up again, thumb smoothing over a crack that’s started to form on the glass as he shifts through dated folders, searching.

“Stardate: 16.5.14. Location: IC 5152.”

Soobin isn’t sitting, only his profile visible in the frame, gaze distant and dark as he stares at something that Kai can’t see, the hand he rests on the table tapping restless fingers.

“We received a distress signal from The Salamander.”

When he faces the camera, Kai’s inhuman heart catches in his throat, a chill settling in his bones. In five months the emptiness in his eyes hasn’t eased. If anything it’s only spread, stretching to hollow out every feature. Kai can see the outline of Soobin’s clavicles through his uniform.

“It’s a trap, obviously. The Salamander was captured when I was still in training on Meon Jigu. My supervising officer . . .”

He draws off, the line of his mouth when he grows quiet pressing thin.

“It doesn’t matter. We . . . We have to get Kai back. Anyone that gets in the way . . .”

Kai blinks as the recording ends, as abrupt as the rest of them, closing out to reveal that there aren’t any logs for the next *five days.*

“Staredate: uh . . . Fuck. 16.5.20. Location is . . . Location: ESO 410-G005. That’s a long one.”

Beomgyu’s holding a tablet in his hands, blinking down at the screen as he speaks. His inexperience is blatant, and he chews on his lower lip for a moment before he seems to gather himself enough to start again.

“I’ve, um . . . Deleted all the footage from the last week. I- I think that’s for the best. Soobin is . . . No, I’m not going to . . . I deleted it. It doesn’t matter. We’ll get through. We have to. And . . . And it had to be done. We’ll be alright.”

The log ends.

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“You look terrible.”

Blunt. Precise. Very Taehyun. “Thanks,” Kai mumbles. “You know how much I value your diagnosis, doctor.”

He’s nursing a mug of tea he can’t drink. The muscle memory of making it had been soothing, and it’s still hot enough between his hands that he can pick up the faint scent of mint and honey. It’s a farce, of course, the few senses he has left playing tricks on him as he accepts the paltry comfort. There’s a metaphor here, he’s sure, but he’s loathe to think about it too deeply. It's unnecessary to carve his own wounds any deeper than they’re already bleeding.

“Yeonjun-ah says you didn’t sleep in your room last night.”

“I don’t sleep,” Kai reminds stiffly. He lifts the mug to his nose and pretends, his eyes closing.

“He’s worried about you."

Alright, now Kai feels like shit. He glares down at the tea, lips pursed around the flare of annoyance and guilt that washes through him. There’s nothing he can say to that, though, no reassurances he can give when he doesn’t even have any for himself. The tea still smells like mint and honey, but his fingers tremble around the mug. Kai sets it aside.

“Do you think I’m capable of making my own decisions?” he asks carefully.

Out of the corners of his eyes he can see Taehyun tense where he’s hunched over his desk, whatever he’s working on forgotten as he slowly turns to face him. “Kai-ya . . .”

“I know I’m a liability,” Kai says, “I’m not asking about that. I mean . . . About *me.* Is there too little left of me for that? Or is my consent not . . .”

Yeonjun is scared of using him, because Kai is a thing that can be *used,* inhuman enough without sensation that his body might as well be an object rather than a part of him. If the pleasure isn’t mutual, what even is Kai saying yes to other than that?

It’s not consent, is it. It’s permission. Or at least that's how Yeonjun sees it.

And Taehyun can’t answer that question. He knew that already, but it’s obvious now, the stricken way Taehyun stares at him saying more than words could anyways.

Kai can give as much of himself as he likes, affection, connection, adoration, but he can only get so much back in return. It’s not a fair trade, especially not if it makes Yeonjun recoil the way he had last night, sick with the knowledge that he can take more than what he's able to provide.

Right now, the physical things that Kai wants aren’t real, phantom pleasures burned past their lifespan by memory alone.

“Have you told Yeonjun-ah what you want?”

It's such an innocuous question, but it still makes Kai flinch. There it is again, that too human word, the knowledge that anything Kai asks for, he can't actually grasp. "No," he admits, choked. "No, I . . . I can't do that."

That would only upset them both, he's sure, and he's already hurt Yeonjun enough.

Taehyun is quiet for a long, agonizing second, turning in his chair to face Kai before he speaks. "What about me?"

Kai stares.

The other man's hands fall to his lap, fingers twisting together absentmindedly, his brows furrowed. "You've been . . . Off, since we figured out that physical affection can trigger your memories. I can help, if you want me to."

"How?"

He has to ask with Taehyun, always, he can't assume. Taehyun doesn't tend to actively seek out sex, eager to participate but hardly interested in making the first move. It's only something he enjoys because of the people he's with, the act itself pretty far down the list of reasons he finds pleasure in it at all. Kai has to ask.

Taehyun rolls a shoulder. "However you need. I can listen, if you want to talk. Or I can . . ." His lips purse, an endearing pout as he clearly wracks his mind for some kind of wording or euphemism that won't sound too clinical.

Kai watches him struggle for a solid minute before he wryly offers, "Fuck?"

Taehyun immediately twists in his chair to glower at him. "Shut up. That's not even grammatically correct. 'I can *fuck?* '"

"Well, can you?"

A pleased huff escapes him when the statement earns Kai the exact reaction he was after, annoyed hands shoving him over backwards on the bed and a flustered, grumpy Kang Taehyun in his lap. "Why are you always like this?" he complains, a palm braced to the sheets beside Kai's shoulder.

Kai arches an eyebrow. "Like what?"

Taehyun makes a face. "*This,*" he repeats, as if that's supposed to mean something. "Just ask me the way a normal person would."

Instead of reminding Taehyun that he's quite literally anything but, Kai grabs him by the collar of his shirt and drags him down for a kiss.

There's a chance that he'll get used to this, eventually. Someday, the distant outline of pressure might no longer serve only to haunt him, dredging up recollections of the real thing. Unfortunately, that potential reprieve isn't going to happen anytime soon.

Kai lets the ache burn at the back of his mind, pushed away so he can try and focus on what he actually has.

He flips them, chasing the memory and diving back in. The rise and fall of Taehyun's chest beneath his hands guides him onward, the fingers that tangle in his hair after a beat encouraging. He doesn't want a repeat of the last time, Kai decides as he works his way down Taehyun's torso, rucking his shirt up so he can press a kiss near his navel. Before, he'd been too eager to feel something, *anything,* the desperation suffocating him until he'd forgotten to *think* past his own, anguished desire. He doesn't want that again, not with Taehyun, not with *anyone.*

The hand in his hair tugs, and Kai lifts his head to take in the sight of Taehyun watching him with hooded eyes, lips parted around a hitching breath. "What do you want, Kai-ya?"

"You," Kai replies easily. Because that's it, right? That's all he needs.

Taehyun's eyebrows furrow, but Kai doesn't give him room to comment, one of his hands wandering low to cup him gently through his uniform pants. The desired effect is immediate, Taehyun letting out a sharp groan as his head falls back against the pillows, hips bucking up into Kai's touch. The fingers in Kai's hair twist.

"Want me to suck you off?" Kai offers, thumbs already teasing at the fabric around Taehyun's waist as he situates himself lower on the bed. He could probably at least do that much, he figures, enough to make Taehyun feel good without the expectation that the pleasure is meant to be mutual. Yeah. Yeah, that'll be . . . Fine.

Taehyun sucks in a ragged inhale, the hand in Kai's hair flexing, insistent. "I don't- I- I want to know what *you* want," he repeats, frustrated. Kai hums and presses a kiss to the skin just above the line of his pants. "Kai-ya, what do *you* want?"

"You."

He can do this, Kai assures himself as he noses at the half hard bulge of Taehyun's cock through his uniform. He wants this. He wants it *so fucking much,* to make someone he loves feel good, to . . .

"Kai-ya, stop."

The hand in his hair tugs, hard, and Kai stills as he blinks up at Taehyun's unmistakably stricken expression.

"*Kai,* you're *shaking.*"

It's not enough.

The revelation hits Kai head on, shocking through him like ice, brutal where it would have left him breathless if he could still breathe. It's not *enough.*

Taehyun isn't doing this because he wants Kai, he's doing it because he thinks it will *"help."*

“No,” Taehyun chokes, quick, fierce, abject panic replacing his hurt as Kai realizes he’s spoken his anguish aloud. “No, *no,* Kai-ya, *no.* That’s *not true.* I do. I *do* want you.”

Too much of a doctor, and not enough of a partner. Kai swallows, vision faltering.

Taehyun’s hands are on his face, trembling too. “Kai, *please,* that’s not true. I would never-”

He’s drowning. This is what drowning feels like, not enough air, sinking fast, cold as the darkness drags you under.

Kai doesn’t move when Taehyun crowds against him, utterly still as the other man winds his arms around his middle and buries his face in the crook of his neck. “I do want you,” he whispers, like a prayer, over and over and over again, words Kai can hear but not feel where they’re pressed into his faux skin. “I do want you, Kai-ya, *I do.*”

It’s not enough.

“I can’t do this,” Kai hiccups. “I- I can’t . . .”

What good are his memories if this is all he can ever have? Even if he does get them back, there’s no point, the uncountable years ahead of him just as devoid of what he needs with or without. Want is a human emotion, but that’s not what this is. It’s deeper.

Kai *needs* to be wanted. And he can’t have that. Not like this. How can he feel wanted when he can’t feel anything at all?

He only knows Taehyun’s kissing him by the way he’s moving where they’re pressed together, stuttered inhales and exhales loud near Kai’s ear. His hands clutch at the back of Kai’s shirt, hard enough to strain the fabric, leave a mark on the skin beneath, but Kai can’t feel that, either.

“It’s okay,” Taehyun murmurs at the juncture of Kai’s jaw, fingers stroking over Kai’s spine, combing into the back of his hair. “It’s okay. We’ll fix this, we’ll-”

Love might be magic, but it’s only going to get him so far.

“I felt something. When I was surging.”

It hurts to say, the syllables sticking heavy to the roof of Kai’s mouth as they slip from his tongue.

“If . . . If love warms me up, I . . . I’d have to burn a *lot* hotter to feel it. I’d *hurt you.* ”

Taehyun sits up, the yawn of space he eases between them leaving Kai colder than he’s ever been. “Kai . . .”

“I can’t do it. To- to get what I want, I’d end up . . .”

“You wouldn’t. If you cracked the codex, I’m sure . . .”

The second stage of grief is anger. Kai bites down on his tongue, furious at the persistent hope in Taehyun's tone that thus far hasn't really gotten him anywhere. He's chasing memories when he should be trying to salvage what little of him is left as it is, falling apart with every passing day because it's *not enough.* Even if Kai could break the codex, what would he do with it? If he needs a power surge to feel human, he'll only end up hurting everyone. That's not- he *can't-*

"Kai-ya-"

Kai twists away. He wriggles out of Taehyun's arms like a caught fish, scrabbling on the sheets until he gets enough of a hold to leverage himself off the bed and lunge for the door. His hand is already on the panel when Taehyun calls after him.

"Kai!"

It is selfish, the answer to that unanswered, rhetorical inquiry he'd whispered to Endolphin on the bridge. It *is* selfish. Because Kai can't have what he wants without consequence.

Kai flees, and Taehyun doesn't follow him as he bolts out into the too bright halls of the ship.

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"Stardate: 16.5.25. Location: KKh 98."

Yeonjun sits back in the chair, one arm thrown behind him and his eyes distant, resolute.

"I . . . I fucked up. I really fucked up. Soobin . . . I made him have to do something ***awful*** *and I . . . I don't know what to do to fix things. I . . . I don't think they can be fixed."*

There's a thick, scabbed band of blood stretching from one side of his neck to the other, and when he lifts a shaking hand to cover it, his wrist is purpled all the way around.

"I- I keep telling him he had no choice, but . . . That's not true, is it. He . . . He could have let that thing . . ."

He forces a smile, an empty, heartbreaking visage, blinking hard.

"It's not like any of them would miss me. I just keep getting us into worse and worse messes. I let Beomgyu get captured. I let Kai . . ."

He stops, the feigned smile falling.

"I'm the one who brought that thing aboard. It's my fault. ***Again.*** *I let it lie to me, and Soobin had to . . ."*

Yeonjun sucks in a wet shuddering breath, and the log cuts to darkness.

Kai turns the tablet off and sets it aside, uncaring as it clacks down harshly on the metal tiles of the bridge. With his hands free he curls in on himself, away from the broad pressure pane overlooking the swirl of stars in whatever galaxy they're in. Alone, the flight deck of The
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Endolphin feels like a mausoleum, cold and vacant, empty chairs and abandoned consoles for a crew that's too broken to man them. He used to come here because it felt safe, comfort easy to find beneath projected constellations from a world that no longer exists as the ship hummed her way through space. But he hadn't been alone then, had he.

A shiver ripples through him, and Kai doesn't dare look up as he hears quiet footsteps pause just beyond the awning behind him.

It's quiet, the air thick and unbroken because there's nothing to say. Kai shudders around the ghost of a breath he can't take and squeezes his eyes shut tight.

"Are you alright?"

Everyone has a breaking point, Kai knows. For some reason, he'd always assumed his was buried a little deeper than others. And maybe it was, since he's kept himself together for this long, grief trapped in the grasp of denial for so many days, festering away.

He's tired. He's tired, and sore, and *done* pretending that he's going to get better with a few fairytale kisses and sweet words.

"Fuck. Off."

The silence this time is frigid, shocked, stretching on and on until it shatters with a weak, "*Huening-ah . . .*"

And oh, Kai *hates* that. Of course he'd noticed it the first time, the purposeful dissonance that he'd just accepted because he'd thought the same thing. The Kai he was before, and the Kai he is now felt like different people. But they're not, are they. He's the exact same person, and he's falling apart faster than he can hold himself together.

A hand tentatively touches his shoulder. It's just the tips of fingers, a wary point of contact, but it's too much. Kai whirls.

"What part of 'fuck off' did you not understand!?"

He hates himself, hates the vicious bite to the exclamation, hates the way Soobin practically falls over his own legs to scramble away. "Huening-"

Kai stands, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. "What is *wrong* with you!?" he snaps, furious. "You- you don't get to *treat me* like a fucking *monster* and then just- just- *touch me* like that!"

He's scaring him. Soobin presses back against the nearest wall, chest heaving. He's *scaring him,* but Kai doesn't care.

"Of course I'm not 'alright!'" he spits. "I'm not even fucking *alive,* Soobin! But I'm *stuck here* anyways, twenty-two fucking years old *forever* because the Gigye couldn't just kill me! No! They had to-" he gestures at himself, at everything that looks like Kai but *isn't,* a recreated shell in the right shape using all the wrong parts, "-make me *this* instead! They had to make me 'useful,' and then *you* dragged me back here just to *abandon* me!"

His trembling hands fist in the front of Soobin's uniform, the same way Soobin had done to him in the hangar. In his grip, Soobin chokes on a feral, *terrified* sound, his eyes wide and his pupils pinpricked tight.

"You should have left me!"

"Huening-"

"*FUCK YOU!* If this is how I have to live the rest of my life, you should have *LEFT ME!*"

"Put him down."

By now, Kai thinks he's almost used to people pointing blasters at him. As it is he doesn't even flinch, eyes sliding to the right to take in the grim sight of the barrel of Yeonjun's weapon pressed against the side of his head. Maybe he is used to it. Or maybe he's just tired.

"Kai-ya, put him down," Yeonjun repeats, oddly calm despite the situation. Kai blinks. "Don't do this, baby, *please* . . ."

Kai lets go.

Soobin slumps back against the wall, a jagged gasp escaping him as he slips towards the floor. For a second Kai's tempted to round on Yeonjun too, if only because he knows it would force his hand, set his finger to the trigger. The urge leaves him just as quickly as it comes though, replaced with the same empty, aching longing that had led him here, consuming Kai from the inside out.

The deck of the bridge makes a hollow, metal sound when Kai's knees hit it, echoing still as he chokes on a dry, awful sob.

It's not fair. It's not *fair.* Taehyun's wrong. Love won't fix him, because it will tear him into pieces first, all the want and yearning and devotion trapped inside him with nowhere to go until it bursts free and breaks him apart.

He can't feel anything. He can't feel *anything.*

In the grand scheme of it all, sixteen missing years is infinitesimal compared to the many thousand Kai will exist, haunted by everything he can't have.

"I'm sorry," he sobs, hoarse, the words hitching without the tears to soothe them. "I'm sorry. *I'm sorry.*"

Shutting down is a relief.

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In the darkness of his own head, Kai doesn't dream. He picks at the tangled threads wrapped around the heart he no longer has, but doesn't follow them. There's no point. What will another memory give to him other than further despair and the proof that he'd once had *more.*
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“You’re hurting yourself again.”

He doesn’t look at Endolphin when she speaks, clutching the interwoven threads instead. Maybe, here where he still feels like Kai, he could pull them out. Would it hurt? Or would it be a respite. The opposite of love isn’t hate, but indifference, and Kai can’t help but think that sounds more blissful. He can’t grieve what he’s lost if he doesn’t care at all.

“Kai-ya, *don’t.*”

“What does it matter to you?” Kai asks, monotone.

Endolphin is quiet when she swims into view, tilting her head to attempt to gain his attention, this way and that before she dives closer and tries to nose his hands away from the threads. “They’re waiting for you. You can’t.”

“You’re right, *I* can’t,” Kai retorts through his teeth. “But no one’s bothered to think about that, have they? *‘Fix it, Kai-ya,’*” he mocks. “‘Fix it!’ As if the fucking unbreakable, stupid codex can be cracked and make everything better!”

It’s infuriating, the way Endolphin blinks at him, slow and calm and everything Kai isn’t right now. “Kai-ya, what are people made of?”

Kai frowns, taken aback, his fingers going slack around the intertwined threads wrapped around his heart. He doesn’t answer.

She doesn’t seem to mind, though, spinning over herself in the darkness, the glow of her shape the only light for him to see by. “Everyone is made of the same thing. Do you know what it is?”

“No,” Kai whispers. Endolphin, he remembers abruptly, is technically Gigye born, too.

“Stardust!” Endolphin chirps, circling Kai’s head in an elegant loop-de-loop. “We’re all stardust, all from the same place! The old universe exploded, and now here we are!” She flips end over end, tail brushing Kai’s chin as she chirrs at him, upside down.

“I . . . Don’t understand,” Kai whispers.

Endolphin smiles, an illusion of fondness in her eyes. “You’re stardust,” she says, “and you haven’t burned out yet.”

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Reality is disorienting. That’s Kai’s first, and quite frankly only thought for several minutes as he swims back to consciousness.

His second thought is that he hasn’t missed the sterile medbay walls.

And his third is to wonder why Soobin, of all people, is sitting beside him and holding his hand.
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Instinct makes Kai want to turn his back to him, guilt and still simmering anger welling in him for a moment before he wrangles it back down, tucks it away.

He's already hurt Soobin enough.

"You were right about me," Kai mumbles groggily, refusing to meet his eyes and instead counting the ceiling tiles. "If you want to say 'I told you so,' now would be the time."

For a second he wonders if Soobin is asleep, the silence that permeates the room deafening. The fingers around his own squeeze, just hard enough to ping Kai's pressure sensors. "I wasn't," he whispers.

His hand trembles.

"I don't want your pity, hyung."

He's scared, still, his fear lingers like a cloud in the air, and when Kai glances his direction, Soobin stiffens. "Huening-"

"Why are you even bothering?" Kai interrupts hollowly. "You don't love me, so why are you pretending that you give a shit?"

Bitter, Kai realizes, that awful, shattered thing in his chest clenching tight. He's tired, and he's *bitter.* Honestly, though, he's pretty sure he has every right to be. Kai pulls his hand out of Soobin's grip and does what he wanted to do right from the start, rolling onto his side away from him. "You're making this worse," he shudders out. "Trying to be kind after- after *everything,* and not even calling me by name? *Stop.*"

And Soobin does. He's quiet, the only sign he's still there at all the choked inhales and exhales he drags into his lungs. Kai turns his face into the starchy, stiff sheets of his too often occupied medbay bed, and hiccups on a wretched sound of his own.

It would be easier if they could break this bone clean, sever it in two with one smooth cut rather than the jagged, sharp pieces it's been snapped into. Because as things are, there's still too much of Soobin in Kai, anguished affection stripped down to black and white memory and nothing more.

He suspects there's too much of him in Soobin, too.

They're tangled up together, a single thread that loops back around on itself, and Kai can't tear it out of him, can't let it go. In a thousand years, and then a thousand more, it will remain right where it always has been, wrapped around the remains of his heart and squeezing too tight.

"I'm not alright," Kai whispers, as though the question was only just asked, as if he hasn't already answered it once. He hears Soobin tense, the squeak of the chair giving him away. And then the anger overwhelms him, and he adds, "I wish you had never found me."

The door to the medbay opens and shuts, a nail in the coffin Kai doesn't have as he curls in on himself and shivers from the cold he can't feel.

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“I watched *Old Yeller* from the archives.”

“Kai-ya. Shut up.”

“Very poignant,” Kai says. “I think I learned a lot. So I’m just saying-”

“Kai-ya, *please* shut up.”

Kai considers it. And then decides he won’t. “It’s fine, you know. You can just take me out back, and-”

Taehyun’s hand slaps down over his mouth. His expression is livid, unmistakable tears glittering in the corners of his eyes. Kai almost feels bad. Almost. “Shut. *Up.* Stop talking. I’m not going to put you down like a fucking *rabid dog.*” He heaves out a sigh, the palm keeping Kai’s words at bay falling back to his side as he straightens up. For a moment, Kai’s sure he’s going to say something else, Taehyun's eyebrows scrunching and his lips parting around another ragged breath, but nothing comes out. When he sits down in the stool he’s pulled up beside Kai’s bed, he does so hard enough that the seat creaks as his entire weight slumps on it.

And Kai doesn’t say anything, either.

The silence stretches thin between them.

“You’re allowed to be upset,” Taehyun whispers eventually, low and strained. Kai keeps quiet. “You have every right to be upset. But don’t . . . Isolate yourself, okay? Don’t push everyone away.”

Kai rolls away from him, too, burying his face in the stiff medbay pillow. It smells like disinfectant. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“*Kai-ya.*”

“Everyone’s holding me at arm’s length. So why shouldn’t I?”

He doesn’t say that he’s been holding himself at arm’s length, too.

It takes everything he has not to flinch when Taehyun touches him, all his willpower not to snap, a shiver shuddering through him too hard to brush off. “I know you’re hurting,” Taehyun whispers, the syllables hitched, “but if you disregard that we’re hurting, too, you’re going to end up doing or saying something you can’t take back. And I . . . I don’t want you to make all the same mistakes I did.”

“I think I’ve already made them,” Kai mumbles into the pillow.

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It’s freeing in its own way, being mad. The emotion settles inside him, a perfect fit, so much easier to hold than the denial Kai had been using to carry himself through the days before.

There isn’t even one specific person or place for him to pin the feeling on. It’s just . . . There. Angry, awful, agonizing, a breath of fresh air he can only imagine the taste of.

It’s easy to be mad because then there’s no room to be anything else.

He’s angry at Yeonjun for treating him like an object rather than a person, too afraid to touch him lest he somehow take away the consent Kai gave of his own volition.

He’s angry at Taehyun for offering “help” instead of something more, whittling Kai’s existence down to what he was, rather than what he can be.

Both of these things, Kai acknowledges, weren’t purposeful. They’re mistakes, *human* mistakes.

“I still love you,” he tells Yeonjun after a few days, the delivery as neutral as he can bear to make it, and he means it with his whole cybernetic heart. “But I need . . . Space.”

Yeonjun offers him a wry, pained smile, one hand gesturing meaningfully to the ship around them. “Well, we have plenty of that. Just . . . Just let me know when you . . . Need me.”

I always need you, Kai thinks but doesn’t say, and nods.

To Taehyun, he murmurs much of the same.

“I’m drowning,” he mumbles into the crook of his neck, holding on tight before letting go. “I love you, but I’m *drowning*. I don’t know how to fix it so I’m not.”

“If I can help,” Taehyun starts, stops as Kai shakes his head.

He’s angry at Soobin for so many things, none of which are the ones he’d actually bothered to say. Once the worst of the bitterness wears off, he recognizes that. He’s angry at Soobin, he realizes, for all the same reasons he’s angry at himself.

And he’s angry at Beomgyu for pushing him away when it’s so, *so* obvious that that’s not what he really wants.

Kai spends the next week holed up in his and Yeonjun’s room, pouring over everything he knows. He combs other ships' logs, the ones that are archived as essential bits of Meon Jigu’s history and thus a part of the ship itself, before they’d defected. He rifles through charts, both paper and digital, and stares down diagrams of human-shaped bodies and hearts whirring with untouchable power, sorts through texts in languages he does and doesn’t know, and picks at the barrier of codex in his own brain until even thinking leaves him dizzy.

It’s not just a matter of language. Kai’s good at that, he knows quite a few. Rather, it’s a problem of reason. The Gigye codex is impenetrable because no sapient species can *understand* them.

They can't. They're not meant to. How can someone with emotions watch a sun get snuffed out of the sky, and hope to comprehend why it was necessary?

Then, at the end of each day, he slips out of the room when Yeonjun comes in to rest, and crawls into Beomgyu's bed instead.

He's surprised every time the door opens for him, stunned despite how it starts to become as routine as everything else Beomgyu does.

They never talk.

Even when Beomgyu shifts beneath the blankets to pin him down, neither of them says a word.

Kai doesn't know what day it is, or what hour, when it happens. He only knows that he's felt it building, one little broken piece at a time, for awhile. They've been touching too much, hesitant hands settling too easily in the night against each other, emotions bottled up because they're too scared to tell the truth. It never would have lasted, Kai sees now, this push and pull between them, love there but left unspoken lest it hurt them both anew.

He wonders, faintly, if it was always going to be Beomgyu, first.

They're the same.

The room mires in silence, the two of them staring at each other on either side of a plunge they can only take with intertwined hands, waiting for a denial that never comes.

Beomgyu lets go of his wrists, and Kai surges up into him.

They don't talk, clothes discarded in haphazard piles on the floor, hands wandering reverently over skin as soon as it's bared, both real and silicone. Beomgyu kisses him like he's dying, trembling and breathless, peppering ardor across every part of Kai he can reach, devouring him whole. Kai leans into every bit of it, hazy thoughts consuming him as he maps out old pathways with new fingers. There's an unfamiliar mole next to a familiar one on Beomgyu's hip, a fairly fresh scar between two ribs, places for Kai to claim as his own like it's the only thing he was born to do. He skates his touch down Beomgyu's back, his ass, and clutches at his thighs to haul him into his lap.

"Lube?" he sighs, teeth nipping at the bridge of Beomgyu's collarbones.

"Same place as always," Beomgyu mumbles, the first exchange they've shared the entire time.

Kai fumbles under the pillow to slip a hand between the mattress and the headboard. The tube he recovers there is almost full, and when he squeezes some out onto his fingers he ends up with comically too much, and huffs out a low, faintly amused sound where he's hooked his chin into Beomgyu's shoulder. Were he still human, he figures he'd probably laugh. "Up," he cajoles, squeezing Beomgyu's ass with the other hand to urge him to bow forward, lean more of his weight against Kai. "Two?"

“Y-yeah. Yeah. Anything, just- *fuck, please.* ”

The noise Beomgyu makes when Kai pushes his fingers into him thrills a rush of affection through him hotter than the sun.

They’ve always worked well together like this, tangled up in a visceral, physical love language, and somehow that hasn’t changed at all. Kai presses in, curls just right, and grins when Beomgyu keens right beside his ear.

“*A-ah,* fuck, perfect. S’perfect, Kai-ya. God, *fuck*-”

He’s trembling, clinging where he’s wrapped his arms around Kai’s shoulders, ragged breaths condensating into the crook of his neck as he rocks his hips back on Kai’s fingers, meeting him halfway. They weren’t talking, and they still aren’t, not really. Beomgyu curses, lost as he strings his words together and bites them into Kai’s skin.

“Fuck, *fuck!* Needed this,” he pants, one hand dragging through Kai’s hair to tilt his head back until their foreheads rest together. There’s sweat dripping down his brow, curving towards his ear, an ethereal sheen that Kai chases with a kiss, a dig of teeth to the other man’s lower lip. Beomgyu whimpers. “Needed this,” he repeats, gasps. “Missed you, Kai-ya, want-”

Kai shivers, pausing where he’s working in a third finger. Beomgyu swears, rolling his hips to take it when Kai stills, a breathless mewl escaping him.

“Come on, Kai-ya. *Need you.* Want you to- to- *ah, fuck*- just like that.”

Teeth scrape at his jaw, and Kai sways, following the algorithm of the pressure in his head. “Feel good?” he asks, hesitant, hopeful, his burning heart spinning in his chest. Beomgyu groans, knee squeezing against the side of Kai’s thigh as he nods.

“Yeah. *Yeah,*” he assures. “So good, Kai-ya. Want you . . .”

It’s an incomplete thought, the plea falling short, Kai realizes, because there’s too much to say now that they’re actually trying to say it. He splays his other hand out across the broad span of Beomgyu’s back, keeps him close, and gifts it in return. “Want *you,*” he murmurs through a kiss he trails down Beomgyu’s throat, over his pulse. “Look at you, Beomie, *gorgeous.* You’re taking my fingers so well.”

Beomgyu hiccups on a sound that hurts to hear, somewhere between a moan and a sob. He nuzzles at Kai’s cheek, his ear, his jaw, his babbling softening to murmured things Kai can’t discern all of. He doesn’t need to, though, every uttered syllable a vow he already knows.

“Want you.”

“So good.”

“Missed you.”

“Right there.”

A thousand ways to say “I love you” without saying it at all.

Beomgyu comes with a shudder and a sigh, breathing hard at Kai’s shoulder, his cock twitching between them as Kai coaxes him through it three fingers deep. He sits up when Kai pulls his hand free to wipe it on the sheets, eyes glassy and wet, another kiss ghosted across his lips and then a second, a third before he has to catch his breath.

It’s a lot like Kai’s first kiss, messy, uncertain, and somehow oddly content. Perfect. Beomgyu had crowded against him in that same storage closet he’d once cried in, tugged Kai down with a confidence he clearly didn’t feel, and stolen the breath from his lungs.

Kai blinks as the memory sinks in, startled quiet just in time as Beomgyu sucks in a shaky, shaky breath in his arms, and bursts into tears.

He’d definitely been on the verge of it before, the sheen in his gaze unmistakable, but that does nothing to quell the alarm that claws through Kai when Beomgyu slumps bodily against him and *weeps.* Every bit of him is shaking with sobs, thick, visceral sounds that claw at Kai the same way his hands do, curled fingers desperate to keep him close. For a moment he’s terrified he’s fucked up, that he’s done the same thing to Beomgyu that he had to Yeonjun, except Beomgyu isn’t trying to push him away. His arms around Kai’s neck hang on tighter, the shuddering wails that heave through him gasped into Kai’s very bones and Kai . . .

It’s the same, he reminds himself as Beomgyu’s torn asunder sobs echo into his own chest, his own lungs, overflowing and overwhelmed in that entirely human way Kai can no longer find the same relief in. They're the same because that’s what this is. Relief. Respite. Connection forged where all their broken parts fit together just right. They’re *the same.*

“Want you so much, Beomgyu-ya,” Kai hitches out, unsteady hands dragging him that barest millimeter closer. “*I want you.*”

The feeling is all encompassing, undefinable, bound up in the tangle of everywhere they begin and end together. “Want you like this,” Kai murmurs, fierce. “Want you to feel good. Want you to be happy. Want to- to *love you* until you can hardly stand it anymore, and then I want to do it all over again.”

Beomgyu hiccups, an aching, visceral thing that Kai knows intimately. He’s crying too hard to respond, but he nods, assent confirmed with every promise Kai swears into his skin. “M-me too,” he manages eventually. “Kai, *me too.*”

~~~***~~~

Sometime in the middle of the night, they merge together again. Beomgyu rolls over on top of him, kisses him until the other man is dizzy and panting for the air Kai doesn’t need to survive. He rides Kai’s fingers with his own braced to his partner’s chest, a pretty blush dusting his cheeks. It’s slower this time, quieter, whispers traded from lips with barely a breath between them. His hand cards through Kai’s hair after he comes, repetitive strokes that while away the minutes. “You’re warm,” he murmurs.

Oh.
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“What can I do for you?”

Kai swallows past the lump he swears he can feel. “Nothing.” Beomgyu’s brows furrow. The hand in his hair stays. “I just want you here. Is that okay?”

“. . . Just me? That's all?”

At Kai's stilted nod, Beomgyu frowns. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

It isn’t. “You can let me kiss you,” Kai whispers. “Let me hold you, like this. Let me touch you.” They’re all one sided wishes, but that’s the only thing Kai has right now. Even if Beomgyu gives them back in turn, Kai won’t be able to feel them.

A thumb strokes over Kai’s cheek, tracing out where the bone used to be and something else has replaced it. “I want all those things too, you know,” he murmurs. “For all the same reasons, I think.”

Wanted.

It’s such a tentative thing, fraught where it lingers half said, as if they stay here long enough it’ll keep them safe.

“Is that okay?” Beomgyu asks, echoing Kai’s own words back to him. “For me to hold you too?”

“I won’t be able to feel it,” Kai reminds softly.

His vision flickers when Beomgyu shifts to cup his hands around his face. “So? That doesn’t make the body I’m touching anything less than yours. Can’t I just want you in the same way? You can’t feel it, but I can feel *you.*”

Oh.

Kai shivers, stills, a desperate, desolate whine wrenched out of him.

Oh.

Beomgyu soothes it while it’s still shuddering in the air between them, a kiss pressed to the corner of Kai’s eye, the bridge of his nose, the cupid’s bow of his mouth, intangible but no less there, love in every breath he takes for the both of them.

It’s still such a fragile start, but Kai thinks, if he holds on tight enough, he might be able to keep it anyways.

~~~***~~~

Timing is everything. Or so they say, at least. Kai’s not really sure what the expression means, but it always sticks in his head whenever something happens at the worst possible moment.
~~~

“I’m ignoring that,” Beomgyu mumbles into the crook of his neck, not slowing the roll of his hips in the slightest despite the ship’s alarm lights flashing around them and bouncing off the bedroom’s walls.

“It’s . . . The alarm . . .” Kai croaks. Beomgyu huffs and rocks back onto his fingers.

“So? I’m not going to die hard, Kai-ya. If we blow up or whatever, I want to come first. Then at least I’ll go out happy.”

Well, when he puts it that way . . .

Kai pretends he doesn't see the wildly unimpressed side-eye Taehyun gives them when they finally trip onto the bridge some five full minutes later. No one bothers to ask where they’ve been, attention quickly diverted as Soobin brings up a starmap at the center console. Something blips bright in the depths of it, a beacon pulsing on an unnamed planet they’re skimming just within range of. Soobin is quiet.

“Distress signal?” Yeonjun surmises warily. “Why did you call us down here for that? You know we shouldn’t . . .” He draws off.

“We’re not part of the fleet anymore,” Taehyun reminds.

Soobin leans down to tap at his console, mouth trembling into a thin line. The coding for the signal pops up into the mess of stars, a familiar string of information that makes Kai’s thoughts grind to a halt as it convalesces into a striking shape.

Yeonjun speaks first, voice hoarse as he blurts out what the rest of them are too stunned to say. “That’s . . . That’s The Butterfly . . .”

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to drop a comment if you enjoyed the chapter! They keep me motivated! Glad I got this one out before I disappeared into the void of bday blues lmao.

1/23/22 edit: I caught covid at the end of December despite being fully vaccinated, and unfortunately still have lingering symptoms almost a month later, the worst of which is fatigue. I promise I will have an update for you as soon as I can. Thank you for your patience.

Chapter 9: Nine

Chapter Summary

> On the screen, Yeonjun shakes his head. It’s not an answer, and Beomgyu knows it, his face neutral when he replies with a tired, “Hyung . . .”
>
> “I c-can’t,” Yeonjun croaks. “I can’t do this anymore.”
>
> Kai knows that tone, that utter exhaustion that sits bone deep and sore at the end of the line, knows it so intimately that his vision flickers again, anguish drawing a distraught sound of his own into the air.

Chapter Notes

> Thank you for waiting
>
> Note: about a week after the previous chapter was posted I changed the name of a ship mentioned from The Alligator to The Salamander. So if you didn't do any rereads during the hiatus, you might have missed that. They're the same ship, and it will be referred to only as The Salamander now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Kai-ya . . . Be safe."

It's the last thing Soobin says to him. Ever. Because the Huening Kai that comes home one year later is not the same one he bid farewell just outside of The Endolphin’s airlock as it docked against the Gigye base.

Those final moments are seared into Kai’s brain, a brand that burns into the very atoms of all he's ever been made or remade of. Even if the Gigye stripped him down to nothing, Kai’s sure that memory would remain, untouched, floating in the depths of space laced through with stardust.

But that's just the last, precious breaths of it all, the concluding exhale of interwoven lives standing precariously in the jaws of death. When it's uttered, that soft goodbye that Kai now thinks they both knew was penultimate, it's bound by so much more. That quiet, *"Be safe,"* is built upon years Kai can not recall, promises that are no longer his to fulfill, dirt over an empty grave where the flowers are struggling to grow.

"I love you," Soobin had said, as easy as anything, and yet somehow so, so wretched, gutted, **aware.** He'd clung to Kai like an anchor, hands fisting in the back of his uniform hard enough that Kai had feared it would tear. "I **love you**," spoken as a fruitless invocation and a reminder of what he was about to lose.

"I love you, too," Kai had returned.

He knew. They both did, deep down. How could they not after all they'd been through? Before The Endolphin, before Meon Jigu, it was them; just the two of them, alone in a garden at the end of the world.

And then it was over, a universe of love sent off with that foolish, hopeful prayer.

"Kai-ya . . . Be safe."

~~~***~~~

Kai does not remember Earth. He did, once, before everything. In fact, he used to remember a lot of things; comic books, old songs, first kisses, pinky promises, sunsets. While The Endolphin hovers in some distant solar system, Kai thinks of all that and more, faces and places and tunes that might as well be strangers to him as he watches starlight rise atop the distant curve of a planet, dawning over its alien surface, and realizes he doesn't know what that's like either.

The Butterfly sits below them, somewhere, and Kai doesn’t remember why that's important.

It's tangential, what he knows of The Butterfly, bits and pieces scraped together from what memories he has left, and the few he's regained. There’s an almost familial lull of intimacy to the moments he's recalled, but it’s fraught, tense. By now, Kai has glanced at the pictures in his room, cautious side-eyes thrown at faces and scenes he doesn’t recognize.

They don't tell him much. Images are just that, unmoving displays of a single second in time. He can piece together enough to understand that someone raised him after he was evacuated from Earth, but the knowledge of that is hollow and distant at best. Kai’s life is made up of circumstances, not choices, a timeline of events mostly out of his control and his feet set upon paths he did not wish to take for himself.

He does not know if he loved or hated Yoongi in the end, and that thought has nowhere to go inside him. Restless, confused, lost. It rattles around in his chest, a flutter of fragile wings, unsure if he should be caught in the depths of grief, or indifference.

He thinks, maybe, that the Kai he used to be wouldn't know either.

The heavy discussion around him settles into a dull droll in Kai’s ears, barely even background noise, the imagined outline of his heart in his throat. They're talking around it at this point, circling the drain and avoiding what they all are too painfully aware of. Murmured remarks on whether or not the planet is hospitable meant only to ease the ache that lingers in the air.
~~~

This is not a rescue mission.

In all likelihood, it's not even a recovery mission.

No one says it. No one dares, not even Kai, detached as he is from it all without the memory to back the grief that hangs palpably in the room.

This is not a rescue mission. And there won't be anything to recover, either. That's not how the Gigye operate, to which Kai himself stands as proof.

Below them, lost somewhere in the eternal ice and snow, is the shell of The Butterfly, no doubt as empty as the coffins they laid to rest back on Meon Jigu seven years prior.

"I'll go."

It's Taehyun who breaks the mess of voices first, the words stiff and resolute. Kai closes his eyes.

"No."

Soobin's tone is too soft, almost stricken, and Kai turns away towards the broad window of The Endolphin’s flight deck so he won't have to glimpse whatever expression he's making to tinge his voice that way.

"I'm the medical officer," Taehyun retorts. "I need to go, in case . . ."

He draws off, abruptly silent as he stumbles over what no one will admit, still.

"Taehyun-ah, *no.*"

Distantly, Kai wonders how much of the time behind them wore away their hope. It might have been different if this had happened earlier, two, maybe three years into their little ragtag fight through the stars. Now, though, they're just wasting time.

He's so tired. "Taehyunie," he whispers, his back to the rest of them. The planet below doesn't rotate, dark across one side and frozen in place, cold. "They won't be there."

Someone had to say it. Someone had to.

Taehyun makes a choked, awful noise. Recoiling, Kai curls his arms around himself as though that will do anything when he can't even feel the grasp of his own hands. "But- if- if there's a *chance-"* Taehyun starts.

"Taehyun-ah," Soobin repeats solemnly. Not a protest this time so much as sympathy, which is almost worse.

And it seems Taehyun thinks so too. Kai hears his breath catch, almost vicious in how harshly it rings out through the suddenly too-quiet bridge. "Fuck you."

Kai turns then, stunned as he finally takes in Taehyun’s tensed form. His hands are clenching at his sides, nails digging into his palms so tightly that his knuckles are bleach white. His whole frame shakes, but he’s not crying, lips pinching closed around the syllables he's only just uttered.

"Fuck you," Taehyun repeats, practically spits. "Just because *you* don't care anymore-"

Soobin’s entire body goes rigid, his eyes wide as he snaps, "Who says I don't care?"

No one answers. Kai expects Taehyun to, if only because it would be warranted for him to finish the train of thought he'd started. Except he doesn't. Soobin retorts, and the bridge of The Endolphin falls silent, the air somehow all the more fraught now that it lingers in a lull. Out of the corners of his eyes Kai can see Beomgyu shift uncomfortably, his arms folding over his chest as he takes an unconscious half step back, almost bumping into Yeonjun who lifts a hand instinctively towards him before he curls his fingers back against his palm and lets it fall. Taehyun doesn’t budge though, gaze hard and his stance firm despite how he's shaking, unflinching as Soobin dares to repeat himself, the words icy. "Who says?"

It's not the first time Kai has felt out of place since returning to the ship. Far from it, really. But it's instances like this that make the feeling fester, when the atmosphere is littered with unspoken things born from a year in which he was absent. Taehyun could, of course, be talking about more recent hurts, but it doesn't seem that way. There’s an ache to his tone, too well worn to just be due to the scant few weeks since Kai’s unhappy homecoming. And it stutters through Soobin’s reaction, too, quiet beneath the front of anger, equally deep.

"I'll go, too."

He doesn't mean to break the moment, but the words stumble out anyways, oddly desperate in their candor, and Kai clams up as soon as they leave him. Taehyun twists around to stare at him. His jaw unclenches and his lips part in surprise. ". . . You will?"

Fuck. *Fuck.* Of course he will.

"Yeah," Kai assures. "Yeah. I will. We can go together, Taehyun-ah."

He's not facing him, almost refuses to, so Kai only hears Soobin’s awful hitch of breath. There's no protest to accompany it, not like there was for Taehyun, and Kai knows it’s because Soobin is aware that he has no right. Not anymore. His shoulders hunch as he shuffles to Taehyun’s side, burdened by the weight of the sound anyways even as he does his best to brush it off. "You'll need someone to help you get into the ship," he reminds, taking Taehyun’s hands in his and squeezing them until the other man squeezes back, pinging the pressure sensors beneath his faux skin. "And you shouldn’t have to go alone."

"Me too. They'll need a pilot."

This time, Soobin’s dissent isn't held back, nor is it alone. " *Beomgyu-* " he starts.

"No way," Yeonjun interrupts. "None of you should be going, but especially not-"

In any other circumstance it would almost be funny how quickly Yeonjun trips over his own outburst, the speed at which he realizes he’s fucked up comical in the grimest sense. His teeth clack together when he cuts himself off, the noise too loud as everyone falls silent again. Kai thinks he might have literally bitten his tongue as he'd done it, the faint flinch when he casts a panicked glance at Beomgyu suggesting such. But it all pales in comparison to the manner with which Beomgyu meets his gaze, his previously carefully schooled expression faltering for just long enough that everyone can see the unfiltered agony beneath it. He covers it up well, the quivering line of his mouth flattening thin and his eyes steely as he stands his ground.

"I'm going," Beomgyu says, even and measured. His arms stay folded across his chest, fingers gripping the sleeves of his uniform so tightly the fabric is straining. "I'll fly them down in *my* fighter. I'm not going to sit around here like a useless waste of space."

Yeonjun chokes, but whatever objection he means to make he seems to think better of. Instead he whirls to pin Soobin with a desperate look, mouth opening and closing around everything he can’t say and his eyes pleading. Unfortunately, the way Soobin stares back isn't much better, just as uncertain and unsteady, each of them equally as off kilter as the other.

Which is when Taehyun takes his due opportunity to declare, "It's decided then. Beomgyu, Kai, and I will go find whatever remains of The Butterfly and her crew." He points to Kai, confidence now overshadowing his previous anger. "How long do you think you'll need to get everything ready?"

Kai hesitates. Technically he could probably have the tools he needs and The Ursa Minor mission capable in twenty-four hours or less. But . . .

He can feel Yeonjun looking at him now, heavy desperation and fear clawing at his back in the silence.

"Two days," Kai decides after a pause. Taehyun’s eyes narrow. "I haven't done any hacking since . . . Well . . ." He draws off intentionally, using the awkward pause of avoiding saying the obvious to barrel on. "Plus, we need to come up with an actual plan of approach and descent," he adds.

Taehyun blinks, slow and calculated, clearly not buying it. But after an extended, tired exhale he mutters, *"Fine.* That's fine. It's not like we have anything better to do."

In a sense he's right. They're not beholden to the resistance anymore, there's no one to report or return to other than each other. And yet . . .

Somehow, forty-eight hours almost doesn’t seem like enough after all. Not when there's always a chance that . . .

The bridge is quiet, cold with an awful sense of knowing.

"Wait."

This time, Yeonjun’s fear manifests physically, a hand clutching fervently at the back of Kai’s shirt as he abruptly crowds into his space. It's enough that Kai can't ignore it anymore, enough to make him turn and take in just how rattled the other man is, the staggered rise and fall of his chest and the wildness in his eyes unmistakable. He's not just scared, he's *terrified.*

"Please."

Suddenly, Kai realizes that he's *vastly* miscalculated. This isn't a rational level of fear, this is something else entirely. The way he lets go of Taehyun’s hands is heedless, unease finding a foothold in him now too as he registers the shallow rattling of every breath Yeonjun heaves on. This isn't groundless fear, it's raw, unfiltered *panic.*

Taehyun reacts first, his shuttered expression shifting as he realizes what's happening. The grim line of his mouth faltering falters, then presses tighter, professional and stoic now in a different sense. "Hyung, take a deep breath."

Yeonjun tries, Kai can see that he's trying, but he gags on the attempt, the air that does eek into him coughed back out in the next second.

Soobin jolts next, frantic touch reaching but falling short, stalling as Yeonjun shies away from the attempt and closer to where he’s clutching at Kai with renewed desperation. Kai grabs ahold of him. "Hyung . . ."

"Try again," Taehyun urges. Yeonjun shakes his head. "Deep breath, hyung. Come on."

It's too clinical, Kai thinks dazedly, his own hands grasping loosely around Yeonjun’s forearms in a feeble attempt to keep him steady. All of it. All of *them.* They're all so detached, void, such a stark difference from the last time Kai saw Yeonjun break down this badly in the same place a year prior. It makes something in him roil with discomfort, the stress of Yeonjun’s desperation clenching and unclenching in the fabric of his shirt made all the more unreal as it sinks in anew that he can't feel it. He needs to do something, say something, but his throat clogs up, the terror in Yeonjun’s eyes just corporeal enough to choke him, too.

"Fuck."

It takes a moment for Kai to recognize who's spoken, the weariness of the swear off putting in the strained seconds that it lingers in the air. But then Beomgyu’s shouldering between them, prying Yeonjun’s death grip off with gentle fingers and weary eyes. "YJ," he murmurs, so soft that even Kai barely hears it above Yeonjun’s gasping inhales and exhales. "Look at me. Right here." He grips Yeonjun’s hands tight in his, thumbs pressing hard against the lifelines of the other man’s palms. "Look at me. Deep breath, okay? Just like this. In," Beomgyu draws in one of his own as he speaks, slow, measured. "Come on, hyung. Breathe."

Like a drowning man, Yeonjun sucks down a jagged breath, trembling fingers curling around Beomgyu’s hold.

"Good," Beomgyu praises, voice still hushed. "And out. There you go. Another, okay? In."

Again, Yeonjun obeys, slow and uneven, the draw of it audibly jagged. He’s shaking so badly he's barely standing, and after a moment he can't seem to keep doing so, his knees buckling. Beomgyu is quick, far faster than Kai honestly expected him to be, only wincing a little when he lurches forwards to grab Yeonjun under the arms to lower them both slowly to the floor of the flight deck. "Alright," he soothes, "it’s alright, hyung. You're alright. Exhale. With me, okay?"

Yeonjun breathes out, breathes in, his wide eyes not looking at much of anything, not even Beomgyu. Kai can see that he's trying, *fighting,* but he’s not all there, glossy fear clouding his expression too much for reason to break through. And it's really not getting any better, either, Kai realizes with mounting dismay, each gulp of air Yeonjun drags in stuttering in their exit so harshly he’s choking on them. There are tears welling in his eyes now, spilling over his cheeks unhindered, and he grasps at Beomgyu’s hands as though they're the last tether he has to himself.

Steadily, Beomgyu clutches them within his own, a thumb soothing over Yeonjun’s knuckles. "Good, hyung," he says, even though it clearly isn't, even though it's hardly making any difference at all. "Keep going. Inhale." Beomgyu sucks in a breath, holding it until Yeonjun copies him in shaky starts. "And exhale. Everything is alright. Squeeze my hands, okay? There you go. Again. Inhale-"

Kai doesn’t count the minutes, instead watching in silent horror as it seems to take Yeonjun far, far too long to come back to himself, every bit of awareness coaxed to the surface with painstaking, patient slowness. He blinks hard at one point, a bit of that glassy terror wiped clean only to be replaced with such an agonizing glimpse of grief that Kai has to look away. Oh, *god.*

Beomgyu must see it too. He stutters on a sharp, choked little noise, nearly as stricken sounding as all the ones Yeonjun has been making. *“Hyung,”* he murmurs, tenor hitched.

Yeonjun hiccups, hoarse and lost and harsh, the last crack in the dam before he dissolves into tears. He was already crying before, but now he’s outright sobbing, inconsolable as he collapses down into Beomgyu’s lap, shaking so hard that Kai genuinely worries he’ll fall apart at the seams. It’s immediately obvious that this, whatever *this* is, has been building for awhile, quiet and unassuming, bottled up under the guise of their steadfast eldest pretending to keep it together. Yeonjun sucks in strangled, wet breaths, the hands grasping hold of Beomgyu’s white-knuckled and trembling like the rest of him. And when he finally manages to speak, the garbled, desperate pleas only make it all that much worse. “I can’t,” Yeonjun shudders out. “I *can’t- I can’t-”*

This isn’t about now. Hell, this isn’t even about *then,* either. It’s a compounded thing, an irreparable ache that Yeonjun can’t surmount with the passage of time alone. There are those that just aren’t meant to outlast the people they love, and Yeonjun has always been one of them.

It’s too much, Kai thinks with a sick, phantom sense of heaviness in his chest. It had been easier when they were younger, overconfident and cocky, sure that every away team would come back unscathed. But they know better now, reality having found a home in their scars

and the bodies they no longer possess. That fear of the end is no longer intangible, it's constantly gnashing at their heels, and Yeonjun can't bear it.

Kai's tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth, thick with the words he can't force into the right shapes, the rest of the flight deck as muted as he is save for the awful, muffled sounds of Yeonjun weeping hysterically into Beomgyu's lap. Maybe that's for the best though, that none of them know what to say. It's not like they have any platitudes to offer, their lives have been forfeit since the moment they left Earth, and Yeonjun is already painfully aware of that, too.

"I've got him."

The statement seems to echo within The Endolphin's too-silent hull, so soft Kai almost misses it entirely. He blinks, gaze cast down to where Beomgyu has loosened a hand from Yeonjun's death grip and is running it through the other man's cherry-red hair. "I've got him," Beomgyu reiterates, just as hushed as the first time. "You guys can go."

"Are you sure?" Taehyun asks.

"Yeah."

Kai's never seen a look like that on Beomgyu's face, his expression oddly empty, resigned yet resolute. His fingers card gently through Yeonjun's hair again, careful back and forth strokes. "We still have to get everything together before we go, and it's not like I'm any use there. I'm just the pilot." He lifts his gaze to Taehyun's. "It's alright," Beomgyu insists. "Hyung will get over it."

The wording is shockingly cold, but Kai can hear the strain in each measure of it, the exhaustion and the ache that he can almost feel. And he's not the only one either, the strength with which Yeonjun merely holds onto Beomgyu tighter, curls into him further, giving away that there's an understanding behind the chilly statement that isn't meant for anyone other than the two of them.

Which is why all Kai can muster in return is a weak, "Okay."

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A year ago, Kai wouldn't have pried.

No matter how intertwined they all were, what went on behind closed doors he wasn't invited through the threshold of was none of his business. But that was then, back when they were all whole and sane, or at least moreso than they've become. Now, though, he has little qualms about being nosey. With twelve months behind him that he wasn't a part of, there's already so much unknown to him that it leaves Kai floundering to pick up the pieces. He doesn't want this to be another thing he drowns in, not when he's so close to the epicenter of the problem.

He doesn't hesitate to grab a tablet the moment he gets back to Beomgyu's quarters, fingers tapping away at the screen and pulling up the security feed purely on muscle memory.
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In the minutes between departing the bridge with Taehyun and Soobin and returning to the bedroom, Yeonjun seems to have calmed down significantly. He's no longer completely inconsolable, or clinging to Beomgyu with the fervor of someone who doesn't have the strength left, physically or otherwise, to go on. Though it's clear from a single glance at the feed that he's not coping well either, with anything, not just his own breakdown.

The two of them are sitting side by side on the floor, a deliberate meter of space between them that makes Kai wonder who put it there. Yeonjun is still wiping at his eyes, sleeves visibly damp with the tears he can't seem to stop, and Beomgyu is tactfully keeping his attention trained on the slowly passing hum of space ahead of them out the window while they circle the planet, expressionless and solemn.

"What do you think you'll regret the most, hyung?" Beomgyu asks suddenly, and if Kai had any breath to hold, it would have tripped in his lungs. On the screen, the pilot's tone is heavy, indescribably sad. Yeonjun chokes on an awful, aching sound. "Do you think, when this is all over, you'll mourn the future we never had in the first place? Or all the time you wasted dwelling on the things you couldn't change?"

The wet, wounded hiccough Yeonjun sobs out is the worst thing Kai has ever had the displeasure of hearing. His vision flickers so harshly he has to set the tablet down on his knees as he folds down onto the bed, sure he'd drop it if he didn't.

On the screen, Yeonjun shakes his head. It's not an answer, and Beomgyu knows it, his face neutral when he replies with a tired, "Hyung . . ."

"I c-can't," Yeonjun croaks. "I can't *do this anymore."*

Kai knows that tone, that utter exhaustion that sits bone deep and sore at the end of the line, knows it so intimately that his vision flickers again, anguish drawing a distraught sound of his own into the air.

"All I ever do i-is *hurt people,"* Yeonjun hiccups. "And I *know* I'm w-wasting time, and that it's all I have but I- *Beomgyu-ya-"*

He shouldn't be watching this, it's a conversation that was never meant for Kai's ears, and yet he can't look away. His vision blurs dangerously.

"Hyung," Beomgyu repeats, a reprimand, an answer.

Yeonjun just shakes his head. "What- what good is t-time when the only thing I d-do with it is make *m-mistakes."*

Of all the things Beomgyu could possibly respond to that confession with, his simple, blunt, "You're right," is not what Kai expects to hear.

The bridge grows quiet, Yeonjun's soft sobs cut short as he chokes on them and lifts his head from his hands, eyes wide and tears streaming down his cheeks. Beomgyu doesn't look away. "You're right," he says again. "You have been making mistakes. Is that what you want me to tell you?" He braces a hand on the floor of the flight deck between them, leaning that

smallest bit closer. “Is that what I should say? So that you can feel justified in hating yourself even more? Is that what you want to hear so your stomach hurts less when you refuse to eat, because you’ll *deserve it?”*

In the solitude of the bedroom, Kai is abruptly aware of the coldness of his body all the way down to the metal of his bones.

“I’ll say it,” Beomgyu goes on, steely. “You’re *right,* hyung. You have been making mistakes. But so have *all of us.* The only difference is that you’ve been wallowing in self loathing for them, so sure you can’t amend them, that you don’t even *try.”*

Yeonjun has stopped crying, sort of. There are still tears in his eyes, tracks of them trickling down his face, but he’s no longer weeping. If anything, it seems like he’s hardly even breathing at all, empty hands falling listlessly into his lap and his mouth trembling in a thin line beneath round eyes and furrowed brows.

“Do you think,” Beomgyu asks, “that your mistakes are so irreparable that they can’t be fixed? Or do you just think that you don’t *deserve* for them to be?”

The awful, wounded inhale Yeonjun chokes on says more than Kai ever wanted to know.

It makes sense. In fact, it makes *too much sense.* Of course Yeonjun feels that way, and Kai should have seen it sooner, the other man’s detrimental inability to forgive himself so obvious it was glaring long before Beomgyu put it into words. It’s not just about being scared that they’ll die, with what happened to both Beomgyu and Kai already scarred into the essence of his soul, Yeonjun’s fear lies in the idea that, should anything happen, it’ll be *his fault.* And Kai doesn’t have to wonder over what end that will bring about, not when Yeonjun’s guilt is already so compounded that he can’t help but push everyone else away, terrified of repeating his mistakes all over again to the point that it’s affecting *everything* that he does.

“I used you.”

I let you die.

“None of you should be going, but especially not-"

I left you behind.

And then, as if to throw all of Yeonjun’s fears, not to mention his own words, back in his face, Beomgyu whispers, “You’re *killing me,* hyung.”

Yeonjun’s face pales so fast, so harshly, Kai’s shocked he doesn’t keel over in a dead faint right there on the spot. Instead, he just sucks in a low, grief-wrought breath.

“I love you *so much,”* Beomgyu says, unfiltered, *raw,* “but you can’t even touch me like you want to, because you can’t forgive yourself for shit that *isn’t your fault* enough to tell me that you’re *sorry.”*

This is the part where Kai should turn off the tablet, look away and cover his ears, but he’s frozen in place.

“Do you think that I hate you, hyung? The same way *you* hate you?” Yeonjun doesn’t say anything. “What about Kai-ya?” Beomgyu demands. “Do you think he despises you? Blames you? Even after he forgave you? Is that why you can’t hold him either? You think you hurt him so irreparably that he doesn’t *want* you to touch him?”

He needs to stop watching. He’s not supposed to be privy to *any* of this.

Kai clutches the tablet in his hands so tightly the glass starts to creak ominously beneath the balls of his thumbs.

“You can’t change what already happened,” Beomgyu says, and Kai can hear the agony in each syllable, the edges of every breath Beomgyu heaves in wet. “You can’t change what *will* happen. The only time you have to work with is what you have *right now,* and you’re *wasting it.* That,” he spits, “is your *real* mistake.”

When Beomgyu gets to his feet there’s no fanfare to it, he neither does it slowly nor storms out, his posture stiff and weary as he stands, weight set slightly more onto his good leg than the other. He doesn’t look down at Yeonjun once he speaks again. “I miss you, you know,” he murmurs. “I miss . . . I miss when you loved me, too.”

Beomgyu doesn’t give Yeonjun a chance to respond to that, a single glance at Yeonjun’s shattered expression seemingly all he needs to decide he’s done and start striding out of the room.

Kai turns the tablet off and tosses it aside.

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It’s almost hilariously easy how he and Beomgyu fall into bed together some hours later. Kai spends awhile running diagnostics on The Ursa Minor before wandering back to the other man’s living quarters, unsurprised to find him already sprawled out in bed as though he’s been waiting. He’s hardly naked, clad in his boxers and a non-uniform t-shirt, but it’s casual enough that Kai knows the state of semi-undress is meant to be alluring in a Beomgyu-esque fashion. Snorting, he makes sure the door slides fully shut behind him.

“Not going back to your own room?” Beomgyu teases, propping himself up on an elbow.

Kai doesn’t miss the thinly veiled inquiry behind the question. “Not tonight. I think hyung wants to be alone for awhile, so . . .”

Beomgyu’s expression crumples, just a little, brief and heartbreaking before he pastes on a smile once more. “Well, that just means I get you all to myself, doesn’t it?”

He doesn’t miss the uncertainty there, either. Kai cocks a smile that’s a lot more real than the one he’s mirroring. “Yeah.”

It doesn’t matter that his touches are meaningless to himself, that he can’t feel the heat of Beomgyu’s skin under his hands or taste the first beads of sweat that gather behind his ear. Beomgyu fills in all the gaps for him that he can, every brush of fingers accompanied with
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murmured assurances. “It’s crazy how warm you get,” Beomgyu breathes at his neck, ardent palms coasting over Kai’s spine and across his ribs like he means to find the core of him that way, the source of that inner fire. “Can’t keep myself off you,” he hums. “Can’t get over it, how *right* you feel everywhere we touch.”

He laughs when Kai tips him over onto the mattress, shivering from head to toe as deft palms pry his thighs apart, heedless of any scars they stray over. His back arches once Kai settles between them, wayward fingers already reaching to tangle in Kai’s hair. *“Ah-* yeah, *yeah-* let’s do that. *Fuck,* it’s been *ages* . . .”

It’s both an encouraging and a heartbreaking statement, one Kai more or less shifts to the back of his mind to dwell on later as he takes Beomgyu’s hardening cock between his lips, only to earn a startled squeal of laughter. His head pops up again, an eyebrow arching when Beomgyu’s sharp burst of laughter turns into an outright cackle. “What?” he asks, deadpan.

Beomgyu is too busy trying to muffle his mirth behind an arm to respond for a moment, and when he does Kai is so simultaneously miffed and *mortified* that he can only blink in response. “Your mouth,” Beomgyu snickers, sitting up. “Kai-ya, you- you don’t have any *saliva.”*

Oh. Yeah. That would probably feel pretty weird then, huh.

“Um . . .”

“Here,” Beomgyu gives his hair a tug, and Kai shifts to look up at him while the other man leans over to grab a bottle of lube from behind the pillows. To Kai’s horror, he knows exactly where this is going, scowling when Beomgyu holds up the bottle and squirts a fair amount over three fingers. “This isn’t going to, like, hurt you to swallow . . . Will it?”

God fucking forbid. “Only one way to find out,” Kai sighs. He obligingly opens his mouth without Beomgyu having to ask, nose wrinkling as deft fingers press against his tongue, lube and all.

They stare at each other once they’re out, the cosmic comedy of the situation not lost on either of them, especially when Kai mutters, “This is my life now,” in such a disparaging tone that Beomgyu hiccups on an inappropriate laugh.

“At least you can’t taste it?”

Kai glowers at him. “I can still bite your dick off,” he warns.

“You wouldn’t do that to me,” Beomgyu huffs. He pauses to wipe the excess lube onto the sheets before he threads his fingers into Kai’s hair again, the tug of them just demanding enough that Kai can vaguely sense it. “I already lost *one* leg, you wouldn’t make me lose a second one.”

The snort Kai puffs out is fond, his eyes rolling before he ducks his head back down. Beomgyu collapses back across the bed immediately, thighs tensing on either side of Kai’s head. It’s quite the ego boost in terms of reactions, especially when Beomgyu lets out a very

obviously unintentional groan a moment later, hips jerking between Kai's hands. *"Hah- fuck!* S-slow, slow down- I haven't- *fuck*- s'been awhile."

"Need me to be gentle with you, Beomie?" Kai teases. The sound that his lips make when he pulls off, slicked with god damn *lube,* is obscene.

Beomgyu flushes, pink all the way down to his clavicles, his chest heaving. "Uh . . . Yes?"

A sharp ache scratches somewhere inside the cage of Kai's ribs, fibres and alloys scraping together in place of the way his heart might have once stuttered, or his breath hitched. He knows it's all in his head, that off kilter stall in the depths of his body built off the memory of being alive and tied to the emotions still burning through what remains of it. But still, gazing up at Beomgyu's quiet, vulnerable expression from where Kai lays across his stomach on the bed, held intimately between the other man's thighs . . .

There's a warmth there, searing in the center of him, that he swears he can *feel,* if only for a moment.

"Gonna ruin you," he swears, dipping his head to the side to nip a mark into the soft crux of Beomgyu's thigh, emboldened when his partner lets out a breathy sigh and tugs at his hair for more. "Gonna make you *scream."*

"P-promise?" Beomgyu gasps.

Kai draws it out. There's no need to rush, the hours that The Endolphin drifts through space with her internal lights dimmed languid and long. He has all night to take Beomgyu apart, practically all the time in the world and unfettered access to use as he pleases. And with the days ahead of them, who knows when he'll get another chance?

He litters Beomgyu's thighs with kiss marks, soft imprints of teeth, patterned galaxies of his own design that leave Beomgyu shivering in the afterglow. Kai watches each one bloom beneath his ministrations before he moves on to craft another. In return, Beomgyu keeps one hand in his hair, guiding his path with a nudge of a thumb, a tug of his fingers, lingering touches just enough for Kai to register with the blunt push and pull of it. It takes him awhile to work his way back up to Beomgyu's cock, and by then he's a *mess,* hazy eyed and trembling, precum smeared over the plane of his abdomen. Kai gives in to the urge to nose near his navel, a kiss drawn above it as he inhales the faint scent of being wholly *human,* sweat and tears and thick arousal cloaking a heady heat that's purely *Beomgyu.*

A hand lets go of one of Beomgyu's thighs to fumble for the lube, uncaring when he squeezes out a bit too much over unsteady fingers. It doesn't matter, nothing matters except for *this,* this single, suspended moment in time where Beomgyu cries out when Kai curls a touch inside him, back arching off the bed and his reedy sob of, *"Kai!"* so heavy with *want* that Kai feels it reverberate through his whole chest.

He teases him like that for what could either be minutes or hours, lost in the ghosts of the sensations surrounding him. Beomgyu's fingers in his hair border on being harsh enough to sense. His needy little noises tremble down Kai's spine, the tune of them a thread to the

warmth he knows, *knows* is there wherever their bodies meet, silicone to skin. He drinks in all of it, every last bit, intoxicated and still so, so hungry for more.

Time moves forward, and Kai lingers as long as he can in the moment, chasing all the proof he's been craving that he's *more* than what he's been made to be.

Beomgyu doesn't warn him when he comes, thighs clenched on either side of Kai's ears, his head thrown back and a gorgeous, choked moan reverberating in the air. His cock kicks in Kai's mouth, insides squeezing around his fingers, hips rising off the bed with his feet planted to the mattress. Kai takes it all in stride, takes it gladly, dizzy and punchdrunk and *elated* once he lifts himself up to find Beomgyu staring at him with dazed, teary eyes. Kai's not sure he's ever seen him so fucked out, so needy as he grabs at Kai's shoulders and urges him up his body until they're nose to nose, lips to lips, the rabbit-rapid drum of his heart beating into Kai's ribs.

"Kai," he purrs, happy, happy, *happy.* Kai would cry if he could, a shiver wracking through him around the echo of his own name murmured so ardently in his ears. *"Kai-ya.* Fuck, I think that's the hardest I've ever come in my *life."*

Kai beams and pulls back just far enough to nuzzle their noses together, and no more. "Yeah? You sure you wanna make that claim? You say that a lot."

"I do *not-"*

"Do too," Kai retorts, light. "You said it the night before that mission where we met those weird mantis aliens. And the time I used that toy on you that looked like a tentacle-"

"Damn, I forgot about that thing. Where did that go?"

"-and what about when we fucked against the kitchen counter, or . . ." Kai pauses, voice stalling as he feels out the edges of the thought blossoming in the middle of his list that isn't really a thought, and rather something more. "Or . . . When we . . . The . . . The closet at the academy? Oh! It was a couple weeks after I kissed you there! You let me- *oh*- you let me fuck your thighs, and you came in my hand and I . . ."

It's so much more vivid suddenly, coloring and exploding white-hot in his head, in his chest, in whatever remains of his *heart,* like the expansion of a dying star. And it's not alone, either, Kai quickly grasping at the fringes of it as it unfolds to take hold of more, *more.*

Beomgyu right behind him that first night they'd broken into the hangar that housed what would one day become their Endolphin.

Beomgyu covered in engine oil, holding a tube that had burst and looking shocked while Kai laughed.

Beomgyu storming out of the classroom after another mediocre assessment result, Kai catching up to him in the hall.

Beomgyu stealing Taehyung's little two-seater speeder, whooping with delight when Kai had climbed in behind him before they took off over the surface of Meon Jigu.

He must have frozen up, stunned and shaken by the wash of *love* that grips him so tight he stutters on a broken, bewildered sound. Beomgyu's hands are cupped around his face, fingers carding through his hair, worried eyes searching his as Kai blinks back to himself. "Kai-ya," he calls, and by the shaky cadence of it, Kai knows it's not the first time he's said it. *"Kai."*

It's not everything, but it's *so much,* more than Kai has had since he came back, more than he ever even hoped to find again. His vision flickers, flickers, stabilizes, and he hiccups on a choked, euphoric, *"Beomgyu!"* and then promptly tackles the other man over backwards onto the bed.

They land in a tangle of limbs and sheets, Beomgyu letting out a confused huff when Kai's weight pins him, nervous hands still sweeping through the fibre strands of Kai's hair. "Are you alright?" he asks. His touch tilts Kai's eyes to his, faces bumping together. "I thought you shut down for a second there, you *scared* me."

Kai wants nothing more than to kiss him silly, to pepper every inch of Beomgyu's skin with affection, barely managing to rein it in with a single peck to the corner of the other man's mouth. "Great. I mean- I'm *great.* I- *Beomgyu*- I *remembered."*

It sounds so simple when put like that, as though Kai had merely reached beneath the surface of the water and pulled up a handful of what he'd been missing, but it's so much more. Beomgyu's breath hitches, his eyes wide with awe. *"What?"*

"You stole Taehyung-hyung's land speeder when you were twelve," Kai recites, the recollection shining as though it's almost new inside him. "And when we were fixing up The Endolphin, you ripped open that old oil tube and got it everywhere. Oh! That time in the storage closet! Was that the first . . ."

"For us?" Beomgyu interrupts, breathless, wondrous. "Yeah. It was. How . . ."

Kai shrugs, "I don't know. It just- all of a sudden, I looked at you, and it was all there. I mean, not *all* of it, but a lot. Enough."

It's enough for now, more than Kai ever dared to hope for and then some, unfurling from the depths of himself as if Beomgyu had somehow reached inside and unlocked it with nothing but his bare hands.

The place they were dug up from feels tender though, new, each memory laced with an ache that Kai both longs for and wants to shy away from at the same time. They're not all good memories, but they're *his,* heavy with the years of love he thought he'd lost.

. . . *Oh.*

Is that it?

Taehyun had said it before, a flimsy hypothesis that they only had the barest proof of. But Kai can hardly deny it now, the weight in his chest and mind soothed over as it sinks in.

A grin splits his face, framed by Beomgyu's hands lingering on his cheeks. "I love you," he says, meaning it with his whole, phantom heart. *"So much."*

Beomgyu blinks, and the startled, elated laugh he hitches out warms the very center of Kai's entire being. There are tears budding at the corners of his eyes, the fingers of the hands he's holding Kai's smile with trembling. "God, you're stubborn," he murmurs, so ardent and soft that Kai *aches* in the wake of it. "Even after everything . . ."

"Yeah," Kai confirms before the other man can finish that thought. "Even after everything."

Beomgyu's thumbs are tracing out the corners of his mouth. "That's stupid," he hums. *"You're* stupid."

Kai shrugs. "Probably."

"No 'probably' about it," Beomgyu sighs. "Ah, geeze . . . What am I going to do with you?"

There are a lot of ways Kai could respond to that, either honestly or otherwise, but it all falls short, stuck behind the placebo of a lump in his throat as he waits for what he *wants* to hear. He knows it already, he *knows,* but . . .

The hands on his cheeks reach higher, fingers curling into his hair, carding his bangs out of his eyes. "I never stopped, you know," Beomgyu says, and Kai doesn't miss the waver in the words, the agony. He swallows around nothing. "Always, I- *always.* Even when I thought I *shouldn't,* and-"

"Beomgyu-ya . . ."

"-I know what I did was *wrong,"* Beomgyu continues unhindered, hitching and hoarse. "I was scared, and *hurting,* and I took it out on you by pushing you away and I-"

Kai leans into him with his whole body, their limbs tangled up in each other, his forehead pressed to Beomgyu's temple as the other man chokes on something that's half a laugh, half a sob. *"I do,* Kai-ya. *I love you.* I- I'm so *s-sorry."*

There's no point in reiterating how he feels, how Kai knows, has known this, the whole time, nor will it do any good to tell Beomgyu there's nothing to forgive. Those are just words, placating phrases, and ones he's sure Beomgyu already knows, too. They've both known all along, that's how they ended up here, tripping their way back into starting over in the shattered shadows of who they used to be, and still somehow fitting together perfectly. Which is why in the end all Kai can muster the strength to say is a reiteration, a conviction. "I love you, Beomgyu-ya. *So much."*

Beomgyu buries his face in the crook of his neck, arms clutched tight beneath Kai's own, wound around his back when Kai rolls them onto their sides across the bed, warm and

intertwined, the steady beat of his heart at home where it echoes into the quiet cage of Kai’s ribs while they’re pressed together.

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It's been a year since Beomgyu has piloted The Ursa Minor, a fact he makes clear the second he enters it and starts fussing over the state of his beloved ship. There’s nothing actually wrong with it, not in a technical sense at least, but as far as Beomgyu is concerned his baby has been *tainted.*

"The seat is too far back," he whines, his tone suggesting that this is the greatest travesty to ever befall him. Kai barely refrains from rolling his eyes. "And the radar screen is too far forward." Truly, a terrible miscarriage of justice. In a rare feat of wise decision making, Kai decides not to comment on the fact that both these slight, very fixable changes are due to the fact that Yeonjun has both longer legs and poorer eyesight.

"I already ran diagnostics," he tells him instead, watching as Beomgyu flops down into the cockpit chair and starts fiddling with it and the console simultaneously. The metal of his right heel taps restlessly against the floor. "Everything's in good shape," Kai assures.

Beomgyu levels him with a *look.* "Sure. Maybe from the *tech guy's* standpoint."

". . . I *built* this ship-"

"We built it," Beomgyu corrects. Kai scowls. "Who's the pilot here, hmm? You?" He smirks then, a single finger pointed at his own sternum. "Oh no, that's right. It's *me!* I'm running diagnostics again."

In a weird way, it's a relief to bicker like this again, Kai thinks as he finally rolls his eyes and strides out of The Ursa Minor's open door. There’s nothing truly hurtful in the banter, all teasing without any malice, the mild irritation that rises in him from it comforting in its familiarity. It feels *normal,* which is such a breath of fresh air that Kai huffs on a low note of amusement once the thought settles into place.

"You're a brat!" he calls over his shoulder once he’s in the hangar, grinning to himself when Beomgyu coos back a mocking, "Love you, too!"

Sheesh.

The hull of the fighter isn't any worse for wear than the last time Kai inspected it in depth just before the excursion to the Panttaur outpost. Their shields held up well during their hasty retreat, and he only spots a single singe along the back of the cargo pod. He's in the middle of rubbing an absentminded palm along the span of black when he hears the hangar doors slide open.

For a moment Kai doesn’t move, frozen in place with his palm splayed across the burn marring the metal. He doesn’t need superhuman abilities to know intrinsically who's just entered the room, the suffocating silence gives it away. Kai's shoulders hunch almost on
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instinctively, upper body curling a little more towards his knees where he’s crouched facing the cargo pod.

The tension is so heavy in the air that, were Kai still able to breathe, he thinks he would choke on it.

"Can I talk to you?"

Bitterness rises inside him faster, and far more volatile than Kai is able to stop. "I don't know," he mutters, sullen. *"Can* you, hyung?"

Fuck. He shouldn't have said that. Kai’s eyebrows furrow, regret heavy in his limbs the moment after it slips out. An apology lingers on the tip of his tongue, but he leaves it unsaid as he pushes himself to his feet and turns to face the other man lingering just inside the threshold to the hangar.

It's been less than twenty-four hours since they've seen each other, and somehow Soobin looks even worse than the last time they stood face to face. The bags under his eyes are darker, the sallow shadows lining his face deeper, resignation draped so thickly around him Kai swears he can almost taste it in the air.

Distantly, he wonders if the handprints have faded from Soobin’s torso yet.

"I . . . I don't want to fight," Soobin's tenor wavers, just a bit, just enough, a match to his tired eyes, the unsteady line of his mouth when it closes again.

Kai stares at him. It could be so easy, he knows, to let it lie like that, and he nearly lets it, too. It would be so *easy,* so *simple.* And the worst part is, he *wants* it to be like that, too.

But he can’t.

He can’t.

The Soobin standing in front of him, exhausted and hurt and fraying apart at the seams is not *his* Soobin, either.

It helps, thinking of it that way, two near strangers chasing ghosts in each others' visage.

"What do you need, hyung?"

That's the best he can do for now, Kai figures, the most he can give without them hurting one another, the response neither an acceptance nor an apology. He lets a little of the tension uncoil from his frame and pretends that doing so soothes a bit of the phantom ache in his chest.

There's half a room between them, meters of distance neither are keen to cross, and Kai hardly blames Soobin for that, all things considered, even if that doesn't make it sting any less. Soobin makes no effort to come any closer, hand twisting for a moment at his sides before he musters up the breath to say, stiff and stilted. "I- I need a favor."

Again, Kai's initial instinct is to bite out a response, astounded that Soobin has the *gall* to ask *anything* of him. He reins it in, barely, one eyebrow arching for Soobin to continue.

"I-" Soobin's cadence stumbles, "I know I have- that I have no right to ask this of you, but I . . . I need you to be the level headed one when you go down there."

Kai blinks, old muscle memory chasing his surprise. *Huh?*

"You- you don't remember The Butterfly," Soobin goes on, hesitant, htiching slightly at the edges. "So you- you'll be able to make the calls Taehyun *won't."*

". . . What's that supposed to mean?"

He thinks he knows, and the presumed conclusion makes him feel ill.

To his horror, Soobin confirms it in the next breath. "You can't bring anything back."

Not any*one.*

Any*thing.*

Kai is sneering before he can stop himself, that awful, agonizing bitterness rising in him so fast it leaves him dizzy, vision flickering. "Why? Can't stand to have another monster like *me* aboard, Captain?"

No sooner have the words left Kai's mouth than Soobin is stumbling half a step back. "What? *No,* that's-"

"-not what you meant?" Kai finishes for him. His chest hurts, a burning ache flaring in the center of it, fizzling up into his eyes until he can't see straight, blinking away the static when he snarls. "Then what did you mean? Please, fucking *enlighten me* about how much you despise the idea of having to interact with me, let alone anyone else-"

"THIS ISN'T ABOUT YOU!"

Sometimes, Soobin gets loud. Everyone does, of course. But Soobin almost *never* yells. Kai could probably count on just one hand the number of times he's raised his voice like that, stern, *scared.*

"It's not about you!" Soobin repeats. His hands are shaking at his sides where they're balled into fists. Now, it's Kai who takes a step back. "You weren't *here,* okay? There's a *difference,* Kai-ya! There's a fucking difference between one year and *seven!* You weren't *here!* You don't *know!"*

There's nothing accusatory in Soobin's tone, his tenor uneven, but filled moreso with that same, unbridled fear that Kai is already used to than anything else. And yet still, somehow, this feels like his fault. It seeps in at the edges, guilt festering in the wound of all those days he lost.

Something went wrong. Something *happened.* And Kai wasn't there.

"I'm sorry, okay!" Soobin snaps. "I know I have no right to ask you, *I know that!* But I- I don't know what I'll do if something *happens* and I didn't-"

He falls short, the words seeming to get stuck before they can be voiced. The fear hasn't left his cadence, if anything it's only gotten worse, Soobin's staccatoed inhales and exhales thin and so utterly desperate that Kai doesn't know what to say, either.

It hits him then that Soobin isn't asking him for a favor, he's asking him for *help.*

"Please," Soobin chokes. His eyes are wet, Kai notes with rising dismay, tears gathered in the corners. The hands he'd balled up at his sides twitch, fingers uncurling. *"Please.* Just this once, and I'll never bother you again. Promise me you won't bring anything back, no matter what they might look like, or what they might say."

"Okay."

The assurance is out without Kai actually thinking it through. His vision is flickering so much that he can barely even see, but he says it anyways, his tongue heavy in his mouth.

That must be all the answer Soobin needs, because no sooner has it left Kai's lips then he turns away, striding from the hangar with hunched and shaking shoulders while the word still echoes in the room.

His departure is sudden, but Kai can't say he didn't expect it. Still though, the space he's left behind aches, and Kai stands there for long, quiet seconds in the wake of it, staring at the empty room through the overwhelmed static in his mind.

He doesn't realize he's sat down until he hears the uncanny weight of his body thunk against The Ursa Minor's ramp, one hand braced to the metal beneath him as he shudders. Blinking doesn't help any, the wisp of the urge only serving to darken his struggling vision for a second before it swims back into focus. His other hand lifts to splay unsteady fingers over his face. *Fuck.*

It's been awhile, Kai concedes grimly, since he's reacted this badly to something, the surge of raw emotion too unrestrained to control, another shiver he can't stop vibrating through his limbs. His vision flickers again, and he lets himself slump further, teeth gritted tight in his failing efforts to resist it. He can't breathe, can't feel his own, non-existent heartbeat to find a rhythm to calm down to, can't-

Two hands grip him by the shoulders from behind, force him more upright, a grunt of strain huffed out near his ear. Kai doesn't have the wherewithal to do more than groan. "Don't-"

"Hush, you," Beomgyu snaps. The grip on his left side loosens, snaking under his arm to wrap solidly around his chest, two fingers tapping at his sternum. "Count, alright? Close your eyes and count with me."

It's not the same, Kai knows, but he tries not to think about that while Beomgyu stubbornly drums out the reprise of a beat Kai no longer has inside him. Instead, he clings to what he's given. What other choice does he have? This is his life, now.

Beomgyu’s other hand shifts to his hair once Kai is able to sit up a bit more without threatening to keel over. He’s rough when he cards his fingers through the fibers, Kai acknowledges distantly, each tug that brushes his bangs from his eyes harsh on purpose, enough that his brain is firing off the numbers of it, the exact weight behind the pulls, the amount of pressure Beomgyu applies whenever his nails scrape Kai’s scalp. It almost helps more than the tapping does, the consistent reassurance that he’s being touched sinking into his very atoms, even when the fact that he can’t feel it threatens to overwhelm him again.

"Better?"

Kai isn't sure how many minutes have passed when Beomgyu speaks again, but he’s sure it's been longer than he'd like. His vision is still blurred at the edges once he peeks an eye open. He must have leaned back into Beomgyu's shoulder at some point, because the other man’s face peering down at him is too close, chin practically touching Kai’s forehead. "Yeah," he croaks.

Beomgyu doesn’t look convinced, furrowed brows and crinkled frown giving him away. But to Kai’s surprise, what comes out of his mouth isn't a protest at the half truth, but an apology. "I'm sorry," Beomgyu whispers.

"Wh . . . What do you have to be sorry for?"

Kai expects some sort of excuse, a comment on how, since he was there, Beomgyu should have stepped in to diffuse the situation that led them to this point. But to his confusion, what he’s given instead is a soft, guilty, "I . . . Have to show you something. And I probably should have done it sooner."

What?

His lips part, and no sound comes out, Kai’s bewilderment at war with his still scattered thoughts and feelings. The lack of response only seems to crumple Beomgyu’s remorseful expression further, though. "It's about Soobin," he says thickly, and Kai swears everything inside him stalls, metal and wires too tangled up to work right for an agonizing second. "Something happened that you should know about."

Chapter End Notes

Again, thank you for your patience. Thank you too to everyone who left comments during the hiatus, those really helped me and made me determined to pick up this project again.

If you enjoyed the chapter, let me know!

You can also hmu on twitter @cat_macbeth, and I have a Curious Cat now as well!

Chapter 10: Ten

Chapter Summary

> That's all it is. All it ever will be. Archived tragedies that Kai can't amend because he wasn't there.

Chapter Notes

> Here I am, on the eve of a glorious comeback, bringing you SPACE GAYS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Deep down, Kai already knew.

And yet . . .

And yet it's all somehow so much worse than he ever could have imagined.

"You deleted the logs and security footage," he says when Beomgyu hands him a tablet he had hidden in a locked desk drawer. The screen is cracked, he notes absently as he takes it. It must be one of the ones Taehyun damaged.

"Yeah," Beomgyu whispers. "In case any other humans ever caught up to us. But . . ."

"You kept it," Kai fills in.

The bed creaks, Beomgyu leaning towards him to keep the weight off his bad leg while he fiddles with the releases of it. "I should be clear that I didn't necessarily do it for you," he sighs. "I just . . . I thought it would be bad if I didn't have it, if things got worse. Like, maybe, if we didn't find you but found someplace to . . ."

He doesn't complete the sentence, but the sentiment hangs between them anyways, that same wistful longing they've always had. Somewhere to stop, to rest, and never leave.

Somewhere they could look out the windows of every morning to see the same view, and call it home.

Kai would have never begrudged them that if they had.

"I thought if I kept a copy, I could find him someone to talk to," Beomgyu murmurs. "Someone who would let him know that there wasn't anything else he could have done, so

that maybe . . . Maybe he'd be a little less haunted by it. There has to be others like that out there." He heaves in a breath, slow, and holds it before he lets it go. "I mean, he can't be alone in that regard, we are in the middle of an intergalactic war and all."

That's all he has to say for Kai to understand. Despair sits heavy inside him like a stone. "Who . . . Who was it?"

Beomgyu lifts his head to look at him, and Kai doesn't miss the sheen in the corners of his eyes before he hastily wipes it away. "Um, no one you know. Even if you hadn't lost your memory, I don't think you'd recognize him. He was the flight instructor when Soobin, Yeonjun, and I were trainees."

Oh, *god.*

"His ship, The Salamander, disappeared a long time ago. We should have known better, but we were so *desperate* to find you we chased after every lead we stumbled upon, even when it was stupid to do so."

"I'm the one who brought that thing aboard," Yeonjun had said in the logs, and Kai's mind roils at the thought of what it would have said to be so convincing, all the pretty lies that must have been uttered about *him.*

Beomgyu scoots closer on the bed, pressed all up against Kai's side as he moves to touch a finger to the glass.

The scene that appears is familiar enough to make him reel, two people standing close together on the bridge of The Endolphin, talking quietly, only one of them human.

"His name is- *was* Kim Jisoo," Beomgyu whispers. "He was older than we are now when The Salamander disappeared. He- he had a *kid."*

Even from the odd, overhead angle of the security feed, Kai can tell Yeonjun isn't armed. He's dressed down, the black of his casual wear contrasting with the Gigye's pristine white attire. There's no holster on his hip. "If I do this for you, you'll take us to Kai-ya?"

"Of course," the Gigye returns, his tone so sincere that for a moment it gives even Kai pause. "I'd do it right now," he goes on, slightly hitched, "except I just . . ."

The way he draws off is too real, too raw, *too human.*

"You want to see your son," Yeonjun finishes for him.

The most painful part of witnessing something in retrospect is the *knowing.* He's not caught in the moment like Yeonjun is, months ago now, he hasn't lived it, hasn't been deceived. Watching, Kai *knows* something is wrong, the ghost of his heart in his throat, his mounting panic unable to reach through time to stop events that have already happened.

He knows that the Gigye that used to be Kim Jisoo is speaking words as silver as his silicone skin.

He knows that his goal is to get Yeonjun to unlock The Endolphin’s controls while they're alone together on the bridge.

He knows the lengths a monster will go to to get what they want.

His emotions must show on his face, sick distress heavy in how hard he grips the tablet, because Beomgyu says, hushed, "I'm sorry. If it's too much, we can turn it off and-"

"No," Kai interrupts, the single syllable cracking. "No. I- I need to see this."

On the screen Yeonjun hesitates. Kai can just barely make out the furrow of his brows in the footage. The flight deck is eerily silent around him, the quiet foreboding from the prospective distance of time. "You . . . Did see him, right?" Yeonjun asks, and Kai’s faux heart stutters at the way the other man's tenor breaks, hesitant and weighed down with such obvious *grief* that it would take his breath away if he had any to give. "Kai-ya? You said you saw him."

The thing wearing Kim Jisoo's face smiles. From where Yeonjun is standing, Kai wonders if it looks sympathetic, rather than grotesquely pitying. "Yeah," the Gigye assures. "I did. They like to keep all us former humans in the same place while they turn us into," he gestures sarcastically at himself, "well, *this."*

It's a joke, Kai thinks dizzily. It's a joke, and Jisoo *doesn't laugh.*

Yeonjun has a hand hovering over the part of The Endolphin’s console he usually commands, fingers not quite touching anything, hesitant. "And he's okay?"

Kai has to force himself to loosen his grip on the tablet, ears ringing with the unsaid askance. *Is he **alive?***

"He's alright," Jisoo assures, no thought given to the reply because it's simply not true. But Yeonjun doesn’t see that. He *can't,* too desperate to do anything other than cling to whatever paltry bits of hope he's given. "I'll take you straight to him right after this," Jisoo swears, "promise."

There must be something in his wording, a familiarity in the false vow, because as soon as the syllables leave the Gigye's silicone lips, Yeonjun’s tense posture loosens. How many times, Kai wonders grimly, did Jisoo offer similar assurances while he was human to earn that, to have such conviction so easily given? It must have been quite a lot to make Yeonjun uncoil so easily, enough that the Gigye picked up the seemingly frequent turn of phrase and let him keep it, a false reflection of the humanity he's lost.

Kai can see it too, how Yeonjun finds solace in the promise, recognition, the hunch of his shoulders going lax in the shadow of someone he *trusts.*

When Kai blinks, his vision stutters.

Yeonjun doesn’t quite turn his back to Jisoo when he moves to access The Endolphin’s console, but that half aside, not quite facing the illusion of a man beside him, is all the Gigye needs.

In the same moment that The Endolphin’s controls are activated, the thing that was once Kim Jisoo closes that small space between them.

It happens too fast for Kai to catch the details, the struggle too close knit and the angle of the camera wrong. But in the span of a few scant seconds, Jisoo manages to get Yeonjun on the floor, and Yeonjun *screams.*

He's fighting back. That's all Kai can focus on in the blur of limbs and crash of sound when they topple down. The Gigye is too heavy, too strong, *inhuman,* but Yeonjun is still pushing and kicking against it for all he's worth. For a single foolish moment, Kai lets himself hope that's how this ends, that Yeonjun somehow, *somehow* overpowers his attacker.

Something glints in the lights of the bridge, metallic, and scarlett strikes across the scene.

It's not an insignificant amount, but it’s not yet deadly either, the splash of blood that splatters up the underside of Yeonjun’s chin and all over the Gigye's hands spraying from a cut that stops just shy of hitting any arteries. Regardless though it does what Kai suspects the intention of it was, and Yeonjun falls silent, unmoving, his eyes wide and his chest heaving

"That's better," Jisoo coos, his cadence now disturbingly foreign compared to how it was mere minutes prior. The inflection of the syllables is all wrong, the tone without a single hint of any emotion other than pure *malice.* Yeonjun lets out a weak, horrified little noise, tears sliding down his cheeks and his hands fumbling up to clutch at the Gigye's white uniform, a last futile attempt at saving himself. Jisoo doesn't budge. "I'd rather not kill you, you know," he drawls, "that would be such a waste of a perfectly good body."

Kai can see it, the way the statement registers in Yeonjun’s mind, the stricken realization of what that means for the very person he got into this mess in his attempts to find.

And Jisoo, the shallow imitation of him recast in silver, sees it too. His neutral expression shifts, a smirk curling the corners of his mouth. "Poor thing," he purrs, "did it just now occur to you that I lied?"

Blaster fire abruptly brightens the scene. It comes from offscreen and hits the console just over the Gigye's head, a warning shot, and Jisoo doesn't even flinch. He sits up slightly from where he’s kneeled and pinning Yeonjun to the floor, but his hold on the man beneath him doesn't relinquish in the slightest. His smile is perfectly plastered in place when he utters a disturbingly amicable, "Oh. Hello, Captain."

Soobin is slow to appear within view of the camera, the gun gripped in both his hands, still aimed outstretched at the uncanny thing before him wearing the face of an old friend. It takes him a moment to speak, and when he does the crack of bewildered disbelief is agonizingly audible. "Wh-what are you *doing?"*

From where Kai is sitting, months later and unable to look away from events he’s too late to change, it's hard for him to comprehend the sheer confusion in Soobin’s tenor. It seems so obvious what's going on, but he can’t imagine what this sight must have been like to walk in to, let alone for *Soobin.* Beomgyu said Kim Jisoo was their flight instructor, someone they grew up with as a mentor, someone they looked up to . And now, he’s a single calculated

move away from murdering one of the people Soobin loves, Yeonjun’s blood already pooling on the floor.

Then, to Kai’s horror, Jisoo makes it all *so much worse.*

"What do you mean?"

The question is the wrong pitch, innocent on purpose, as though his hands aren't currently wrapped around Yeonjun’s neck.

Soobin blinks, gaze snapping from Yeonjun, who's staring at him with panicked, tear filled eyes, blood on his cheek and seeping out between the Gigye's fingers, and Jisoo, the latter of which simply stares back.

"Soobin-" Yeonjun croaks.

Jisoo interrupts him, both with a squeeze of his hands around the man's throat and a pointed, "Well, Soobin? Aren't you going to answer me?"

Again, Kai can tell that he's choosing his words carefully, drawing upon whatever knowledge of his old life the Gigye have left him with just enough familiarity to make Soobin hesitate. "You . . ." He can't seem to get the question out, instead faltering into a hoarse, *"Why?"*

Jisoo tilts his head, like a confused child. Kai’s insides roil. "'Why?'" the Gigye parrots, tone still sugar sweet. "Why not? Does it matter, Soobin? I'm your teacher, are you really in any position to be questioning me?"

Soobin doesn’t respond to that, and the footage is just clear enough that Kai can see his adam's apple bob as he swallows.

"When have I ever done anything to hurt you?" Jisoo asks, and the irony of such a question clearly isn't lost on him. His smile as he once more tightens his grip around Yeonjun’s throat is saccharine. "You *know* me, Soobin. I would never do something without reason, I *promise."*

It's the same, that deliberate phrasing he'd used to lure Yeonjun into letting his guard down, the act of a man who cares. But that's all it is, a farce.

There's no way for Kai to know what exactly triggers Soobin’s reaction, whether it's just his fragile faith finally breaking, or if it was something Jisoo said, a mannerism he didn't quite manage to replicate correctly. Either way, the retaliation to that brittle little vow is nearly instantaneous, and the results far more awful than Kai ever would have imagined.

Soobin’s grip on the blaster steadies, and he fires.

Kai has seen Soobin kill a handful of Gigye in their years aboard The Endolphin. It's always quick, efficient. And in a way, Kai supposes this is, too. Except that Soobin *doesn't stop.*

The first shot probably does the job, the beam of it cutting directly through the skull of the thing that was once Kim Jisoo. The second does the same to his throat, a third blazing a hole

clean through his shoulder. Shots four and five hit the Gigye's ribs, torso, the sixth severing the cap from his left knee.

That's the point where Kai stops counting, but in the end, he thinks Soobin must fire his blaster somewhere around a dozen times.

Jisoo, who was no longer a human being in the first place, certainly isn't anything resembling one once Soobin is through with him. What remains is merely a tattered mess of singed silicone and seared metal that slumps listlessly over the tiles, hands only unwinding from Yeonjun's throat when Soobin stalks forwards to physically kick the husk aside.

"Hyung," Soobin murmurs as he drops down to the floor of the bridge. He's already tugging his uniform shirt over his head before his knees hit the metal paneling, the fabric bunched to his palm to press against the gash scarred across Yeonjun's neck that hasn't yet stopped its steady seep of blood.

After that show of sheer brutality, his calm demeanor while he applies pressure and calls for Endolphin is sincerely unsettling. There's no light in his eyes during the time he waits for the rest of the ship to be alerted to the situation, and he doesn't say another word either, grimly stoic in his task of keeping Yeonjun together and alive.

Even when Taehyun comes barreling onto the flight deck, his face ghostly white save for the heavy bags under his eyes, Soobin still says nothing. He stays silent, moving his hands where they need to be under Taehyun's frantic instructions, holding the tools that he's given, face scarily blank.

It's only once the two of them have transported Yeonjun to medbay that Kai recognizes what this is.

The feed tracks Soobin back through the Endolphin's corridors, switches between the security footage until he reaches the bridge again, and then lingers there right beside him.

Soobin stands in the doorway between the deck and the hall at his back, a hand braced to the arch of the metal. His nostrils flare with every exhale, the rise and fall of his chest outlined in the blood that's smeared across the bare skin.

Minutes pass, quiet and long, before he takes a step.

The Gigye's body hasn't moved in the interim, but Soobin approaches like it might do so at any moment. Nothing happens, the bridge silent save for the quickening sound of Soobin's staggered breaths.

"Seonsaengnim?"

Kai chokes, vision blurring, flickering, a hand letting go of the tablet so he can put it to his mouth.

Shock.

Soobin doesn't- it was all adrenaline. He's *in shock,* and he's only just now . . .

"Seonsaengnim?" Soobin tries again. He's shifted to crouch beside the remains, one shaking hand extended towards an inhuman other, lifeless and cold in the same way it has been for years now. "Seonsaengnim?"

There's no answer. There never will be.

It takes Soobin another few tries to realize that though, trembling fingers nudging at Jisoo's with faltering confusion, then desperation.

"Seonsaengnim? *Seonsaengnim?"*

He was dead before they found him, but that hardly matters. All Soobin sees is the same person they thought they brought aboard, a teacher, a mentor he *trusted* the promises of, made of nothing but mutilated bits of metal and silicone.

Beomgyu reaches over to turn the tablet off as soon as Soobin starts screaming.

~~~***~~~

Being angry is easy, that's why it's one of the first stages of grief. Anger is a reaction, the outlash of hurt to cover the wound, and that's exactly why it's so hard to let go of. Kai doesn’t *want* to be angry, but the alternative . . .

The devastation that lies beneath isn't any better.

He was so angry. *So angry* at all the things he couldn't change. And once he isn't, he just feels . . . Hollow.

That's the only way he knows how to describe it, an awful empty space in the center of himself, aching where the anger was carved out of him to leave it.

The grief sinks into the phantom heart of him slowly in its wake, heavy and quiet.

There are more details of course, things Beomgyu tells him while Kai sits there on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. But none of them really matter. The amount of time between Yeonjun bringing Jisoo aboard and him showing his true colors (four days), who the Gigye spent the most time with while he was in the holding cell (Soobin), or who ended up being the one to drag the body to the airlock to eject it (Beomgyu), none of that *matters.* The before, the after, it's all just inconsequential information that leads nowhere, a messy start and a messy end with an awful, irreparable middle.

That's all it is. All it ever will be. Archived tragedies that Kai can't amend because he *wasn't there.*

But that's why it happened, isn't it; all those little details that don't matter, the bits and pieces that lead to the unthinkable. *They were looking for* ***him.***

He thinks of Soobin's hands shaking around the grip of the blaster pointed at his head, his eyes wide and wild, trembling fingers never quite managing to pull the trigger. Why? After Jisoo, after everything, *why?*
~~~

"It's not your fault, Hyuka," Beomgyu whispers before Kai eases himself off the edge of the bed on unsteady legs, the tablet set aside atop the sheets, the image of Soobin realizing what he'd done frozen in time across the screen. "You know that, right?" He'd gotten to his feet too, a hand on the small of Kai's back pressing just hard enough that Kai can pretend to feel it. "It's not your fault."

Maybe, Kai thinks in the desolate cavern of himself, maybe not.

It doesn't matter in the end if it is, he supposes. The results are the same either way.

After that, Beomgyu gives him his metaphorical breathing space, a gentle, sad smile and squeeze of his hand around Kai's like a lighthouse he can see through the storm.

The hour isn't too late when he wanders out into the halls of The Endolphin, the dimness level of the lights indicating it's probably close to dinner. He thinks about calling her, Endolphin that is, walking the expanse of the ship with the artificial illusion of company, and decides against it. She'd want to know what's wrong with him, and Kai would have no idea how to explain it to her in a way she would understand. Hell, he's not even sure he can explain it to himself, the fleeting, sore words that flit through him intangible, too frayed with agony to stick.

Devastated.

Soobin.

Hollow.

Soobin.

Empty.

Soobin.

Kai picks at the thin remnants of a thread sticking out of the breast of his uniform shirt, his other hand on the wall to his right as he follows it through the ship. It doesn't take long for his steps to lead him to the inevitable, and he pauses with a palm braced the arch leading onto The Endolphin's flight deck, ears ringing with the thrum of a heartbeat he doesn't have but swears continues to races inside him, chasing all the pieces he's still trying to fit back together.

Soobin sits on the floor of the bridge with his back to him, and Kai lingers in the doorway, not daring to say anything lest he break the spell of the moment.

He has the box for the portable Endolphin cradled gently in the palm of his left hand, a laserpoint cutter held between his teeth and a small solder wand gripped with the forefinger and thumb of his right. Endolphin hovers near his shoulder, peering at the exposed wire innards of her pocket-sized workings with the same focused intensity as the ship's captain.

"What are you doing?" she chirps.

By the exasperated manner with which Soobin pauses to pop the laserpoint out of his mouth and place it properly aside, this must not be the first time she's asked. "I don't know," he mutters, brazenly honest. "I was never good at this stuff. But I've been going off of the original schematics from when Kai built you, so hopefully I'm not fucking it up too much." He glances up at her. "This doesn't hurt, does it?"

Endolphin gives him a distinctly amused sounding little hoot. "Nope! I do not have nerves."

Though it's not the first time Kai has found himself in this exact position, somehow it feels more visceral now, the ache of the sensation of being on the outside looking in as isolating as ever. Whether it's watching old security recordings on a screen or standing quietly off to the side of something like this, the uncanny discomfort that settles into the electric impulse of Kai's inner workings is identical. In the end, it's all the same.

The realization stings when it hits Kai anew where he stands unnoticed at the threshold of the flight deck. Knowing, being aware of those details he didn't have before, both big and small, haven't changed *anything.* All it's done is leave him wanting, the same way he has been from the very start, starved for a life that he can't return to.

He doesn't hate Soobin any more.

But he also doesn't love him any less, either.

Kai stays rooted to the spot, quiet as the dead where he stands unnoticed in the awning, his dismay a yawning ache in his poor excuse for a heart. All that anger, all that agony, burned down to ashes to be replaced with that same old longing it had started as when he'd first been brought back aboard the ship.

It takes more self control than he'd like to turn away, his whole body feeling stiff when he does it as though the tattered remains of who he used to be are trying to fight the indifference of his grim reality. What good would it do, anyways, to talk to Soobin now? Knowing hasn't changed that fissure between them, it's merely given it a name, the depth and breadth of it still cutting sharply through the both of them. *It doesn't make it any better.*

Nothing has changed.

It's that festering emptiness that guides Kai's steps as he leaves the bridge behind him, the anguish that resides in the hollow expanse inside that urges him to walk, searching. His feet move almost intrinsically, slow strides carrying him on with the sole thought of comfort in mind. The feeling is hardly new, but the intensity of it might as well be, the dizziness that washes over him, thrumming with that old, ever-present pang of loss utterly raw.

Kai stalls, his hand on the wall of whatever hallway he's in, unsteady as his vision flickers.

If that's the case, what's *the point,* then? If every stride he makes leads back to the same place, how can he possibly move forward? Wounds like this, Soobin, *himself,* those aren't things that can be fixed. He can't repair trauma like he would a damaged ship, he can't push definitive humanity back into a container it simply no longer fits the shape of.

Fix it, Kai-ya.

He can't.

He can't fix that. It's not possible. Which means . . .

Which means the only thing he can do is . . .

Start over.

Oh.

Start over. Make it *new.* They're different people now, but that's not a bad thing, is it? They can be different people and still . . .

Kai doesn't realize he's ended up back in the personal quarters until he's already reaching a hand out towards the authorization panel for his own room, the irony that he's ended up back where he began *physically* too not lost on him.

Comfort. That's what he'd been after, his feet moving on instinct, aching to bring him back to where he'd started in safe harbor.

Yeonjun doesn't look startled to see him when the door to Kai's room *(their* room) slides open, but he flusters the moment their eyes meet, the candle he's holding fumbled down onto the desk so hastily that the flame goes out. "Y-you're early!"

Huh?

Kai blinks. "I am?" His gaze scans the cramped little space as he says it, abrupt bewilderment fading as he takes in what the other man has quite obviously been up to. The mess that had occupied his desk has been cleaned up, tablets and trinkets set aside in a haphazard but stable pile on a nearby shelf and replaced with the settings for a meal and a cluster of candles, which are sporadically populating the rest of the room as well. There's even some sort of slow, sultry music playing from a speaker nestled into the headboard of the bed, Kai notes, the perfect finishing touch to, well, *this.* He bites the inside of his lip, unsure of what the expected reaction to such a sight is meant to be. "Um . . ."

Yeonjun puffs out a sigh, palms braced against his hips as he gives the area the same once-over Kai had a moment before. "Okay. Look. I know it's not stellar-"

"Hyung-"

"-but I didn't exactly have a lot of time. Plus, I told Taehyun to fetch you in a half hour, not five minutes. Not sure how he got that mixed up, those are two very different numbers-"

"Yeonjun-ah."

He's stressed. Kai can see that he's stressed, the light lilt of his voice not enough to cover up the tenseness in his frame, the dark circles under his eyes, or the reddened mark on his lower lip where he's been worrying at it with his teeth. And his posture only stiffens more when Kai

interrupts him, mouth snapping closed as his nervous babbling ceases abruptly. They stare at each other like that for a moment, quiet, unsure, before Kai steps the rest of the way into the room, a hand to the panel by the door shutting it softly behind him.

Like this, in the manufactured half-light of candle flame and dimmed overheads, Kai's inhuman eyes find the details he doesn't want to see easier, as though the darkness has lined them in stark relief. The scar on Yeonjun's throat isn't thick, but it's definitely there, pristinely straight and cut just short of where it would have been fatal. One of Kai's hands fists at his side.

It strikes him at the oddest times, the grim reminders that they're all painfully mortal now visible in so many ways, old wounds, missing limbs, cold bodies, broken minds, proof that time is taking too much from them as it passes.

Kai dreads that it might soon take more.

"What's all this for?"

He's playing dumb, obviously, the purpose of what Yeonjun's been doing abundantly clear. But he wants to hear it aloud, too, even as he acknowledges the selfishness of that thought.

Isn't he allowed, though? After all that's been said and done. After *everything?* He wants to be selfish for this; maybe he even deserves to be.

Quite frankly, Huening Kai is tired of wasting time.

"Looks kinda silly, doesn't it," Yeonjun mumbles. "I mean, it definitely was a better plan in my head."

It's not half bad, really, given their limited resources out in the depths of space. There's thought in it, the candles and soft music, and Kai doesn't begrudge the plates set out for two at all either, the casual slip of the mind more endearing than it could ever be offensive. *Normal,* Kai thinks, fond and faux heartsore all at once. This might have been something they would have done together if their lives had ever been *normal.*

And Yeonjun confirms that, a hesitant whispered, "It was supposed to be a date . . ."

Kai swallows around nothing, vision blurring at the edges before he musters up the will to blink it away. "I don't think I've ever been on a date."

The statement, simple as it sounds, stings, that now ingrained uncertainty about the specifics of his own life an integral part of conversations like this. He doesn't think, but he also doesn't *know.*

Yeonjun, though, laughs, low and only the slightest bit bitter. "Yeah, well, I'm not sure any of us have. When would we have found that kind of time while we were busy being molded into perfect little soldiers?" He shrugs then, the motion worn with nonchalance, smile strained. "Sorry. I . . . It seemed like a good idea, but now that you're here . . . I don't know what to do."

That's funny, because neither does Kai.

He glances around the room again, distressed suddenly at how obviously out of their depth they both are. Dinner. Candles. Music. The comfort of a space that's the closest thing they'll ever have to home. Yeonjun's gone to all this trouble, and yet they're still floundering, lost between the edges of what they were and what they have never been at all. There's a middle ground somewhere though, something that can be *them* without fitting into those labels that no longer fit. They just have to reach for it . . . Together.

Start over.

Fall in love again from a different beginning.

"I, uh-" Kai falters, embarrassed as soon as the idea occurs to him. It almost feels *too* intimate to ask. "Do you, um, know how to dance?"

To his infinite surprise, Yeonjun's whole face lights up. "Oh! Yeah! I- I do, actually. A little. Nothing fancy." He's backtracking, doubting himself, but Kai doesn't let him get very far down that road, biting back a grin as he cheekily holds his hands out at the ready. Yeonjun flusters further. "I said it's nothing fancy! Oh my god, at least position your arms right."

There's not much room between the bed and the desk, their personal quarters designed for efficiency, not intimacy, but somehow they manage to make it work. Yeonjun steps into his space to adjust his stance, muttering to himself as he does. "I took a few classes on Earth, pestered the hell out of my eomma to let me do it, but I was only ten when, well . . . Anyways," he sniffs, the unsure touch of his palm on the small of Kai's back, now, "don't make fun of me. It'll be a miracle if I remember how to do even a basic waltz."

Kai smiles. "I can't make fun of you, hyung. I don't even know what a waltz is," he reminds smoothly, and it's *almost* funny, the quirk of Yeonjun's mouth in the corners equally amused and sad.

"Doesn't matter," he quips back around the faintest quiver in the first few syllables. "You're Huening Kai, you'd still find a way."

This is the closest they've been for awhile, nearly chest to chest as they sway together to the gentle notes playing from the speaker, and Kai can't help but want more from it. Without the ability to feel, it never seems like he can get close enough, his body unconsciously chasing after the warmth it lacks. Even when he steps back, following the other man's murmured instructions *(feet together again, Kai-ya, there you go),* he's quick to pull Yeonjun right along with him, the space left between them unaltered as they slowly spin round in tandem.

They're almost being too careful, Yeonjun focused on recalling half remembered motions from a lifetime ago, and Kai very valiantly concentrating on not stepping on his toes while he does. And yet, Kai doesn't think he'd prefer it any other way. It's cautious, slow, *new,* the stilted laugh Yeonjun lets out when their foreheads bump together while they're both staring intently at the floor casting loose a swarm of butterflies to tangle their wings up in the wires inside Kai's chest. "Ah, we're making a mess of this," Yeonjun huffs.

Maybe. Rolling his eyes, Kai knocks their foreheads together again, this time on purpose. "When's the part where you twirl me around?"

This time, Yeonjun's laughter lasts long enough for Kai to bask in it, precious seconds where he fervently catalogs all the little things he didn't realize he's missed. "I don't think that's part of a traditional waltz," Yeonjun snickers, his eyes crinkling in the corners, still too young for the lines to stick. His arm lifts, the hand holding on to Kai's tugging until Kai obligingly ducks beneath his elbow in as much of a spin as the limited space allows. "There you go! Encore!"

They're nose to nose when Kai lets himself be pulled back to where he started, the music crooning on in tunes that might have once been familiar. "So romantic," he teases. "I bet you do this with all the pretty boys."

"See? I knew you'd make fun of me."

"Am I?" He doesn't think he is, and by the coy side-eye he's receiving for the remark, he'd hazard a guess that Yeonjun doesn't think so, either. Regardless, they stay their course, bodies locked in a slow back and forth sway, barely on beat to the song.

"You are," Yeonjun insists without malice. "Such a brat, as usual. All that *'hyung, hyung,'* just to turn around and be rude with the leeway I give you for it.

Hilarious. "Well it works, doesn't it?" Kai retorts coolly, "It gets you to pay attention to me."

It's subtle this time, the memory surfacing like a bubble rising from the bottom of a dark sea, glassy and pearlescent with the passing of time. How old had he been, then? Ten? Eleven? Young enough still that Yeonjun had obliged him when Kai climbed into his bunk in the barracks at night, though old enough to earn a sigh for it. He'd done it so often, stirred awake in dark hours by fraught dreams of watching the lights in earth go out through the windows of the ark, heedless of how much of a pest he must have been. In the morning, they'd bicker, half-meant insults traded before Kai was inevitably shooed away, warned not to return and to keep to the younger kids' side of the room.

But he always came back.

Kai remembers Yeonjun's hand on his spine, slow up and down strokes like dance steps from shoulder blades to lower back, soothing away tears hidden in an already damp pillowcase.

Safe.

"I was looking for you, earlier," Kai murmurs suddenly, warm in the echo the recollection leaves behind. He hadn't realized it then, but he had been, hadn't he, vision flickering as he'd instinctively sought out a stable haven for his hurting heart. Yeonjun leans a bit of space between them, head tilted back with the flip in their height difference that age has bestowed. "I was . . . Upset, and scared, and . . . And I wanted . . . I feel *safe* with you, hyung."

He'd done it then as well, weeks ago now, seeking solace in Yeonjun *first.*

And it seems, to Kai's sore, sorry excuse for a heart, that Yeonjun is all too aware of that, too. His brows furrow, lips parting around an exhale that rattles between them, as stricken as it was all those nights before. "I don't want to hurt you."

In contrast to his words, Yeonjun's hands have already wandered, the lifelines of his palms cupped around Kai's jaw, drawing his face down so that they're almost nose to nose. "You won't," Kai swears, and he *means it* this time. He won't. *They won't.* "We- we'll be better. S-start over. Right? Yeonjunie-ya, I *need-"*

Later, he'll realize what he's said, backtrack through his own fumbling admissions and find the gravity he missed. In the moment though, it's all so inconsequential, the only thing on his mind the way Yeonjun's wide eyes blink away half-shed tears, relief stark in the rough exhale he breathes in the gasp before their mouths crash together.

Before.

By now, Kai feels like the majority of his life is made up of befores. Before they fled Earth. Before Meon Jigu. Before he fixed The Endolphin. Before the Gigye took him. Before he realized that nothing would be easy ever again.

Before, when they'd still both been aching too harshly, so desperate for connection, and ended up hurting each other.

"Be rough," Kai had begged then, grasping onto the faintest illusions of normalcy, not caring for how detrimental that might be for the both of them.

He does the opposite now, shivering with a chill he can't sense as Yeonjun kisses him. They're unsteady together like this, leaning their weight on one another, slightly swaying with the music that hasn't stopped playing. It's not enough, the pressure Yeonjun's body against his barely pinging those little numbers in his head, the warmth of his breath on Kai's lips an illusion cast by the visible rise and fall of his chest. *It's not enough.* But . . .

That doesn't make him want it any less, the longing for proximity no less harsh than it has been this whole time, a steady fire burning and burning away at him from the inside out. He hasn't stopped aching, maybe he never will, *but-*

"Yeonjunie," Kai whispers, breaking the kiss just so he can bury his face into the crook of Yeonjun's neck, knees bending just so he can do so. Yeonjun exhales near his ear, loud. *"Please,* I need . . ."

It scares him, Kai realizes in the hush that falls between them, quiet as the words stick to his tongue. Yeonjun is the only person he's ever been like this with, let himself be so *vulnerable* in the arms of, and he's terrified of fucking that up again. His askance stalls in his throat, uncertain, eyes squeezing shut as a tremble ripples through him.

The hand that soothes down the shaking line of his back is unsteady, too. *"Baby.* We don't have to-"

No. *No.* "I *want* to," Kai chokes. "I just . . ."

He's too heavy, Kai thinks miserably, putting too much of his weight on the other man, and yet unwilling to let go for even a moment, lest it seperate them forever. The light that leaks through his eyelids flickers.

"Tell hyung what you want then," Yeonjun murmurs. *"Tell me."*

Before, they didn't talk enough, chasing the recollections of all they used to be, refusing to acknowledge how much change a year brought them. *They should have talked.*

They're talking now, though, and the belated respite of it, not too late, *never,* sinks into the starlight of Kai's soul like it's coming home to rest.

"Talk to me," Kai mumbles into Yeonjun's shoulder. His head spins, the hand on his back shifting to accompany the other on his hips, one on either side, nudging him gently towards the edge of the bed. "Talk to me while you- *while you fuck me,* so I can- I want- *I want to feel it."*

It's a nothing more than dream, but he can't help but crave it regardless, desperate, desperate *always.*

Now that he's started, the confessions slip from him like his breath would if he were alive, involuntary, natural. "Want you inside me," he mumbles, eyes opening half lidded when Yeonjun tips him over backwards across the mattress. His hands reach up, needy, pushing at the hem of Yeonjun's shirt until he takes the cue and tugs it off over his head. He's still too skinny, Kai thinks distantly, palms smoothing over the revealed planes of skin. "Talk to me while you touch me," he pleads. "Let me know if I'm warm or- or cold-"

Yeonjun cuts him off with another kiss. It lingers longer this time, fierce enough to leave Kai's vision wavering at the edges all over again. He squints when Yeonjun pulls away, bewildered in the brief beat before Yeonjun murmurs, "You're warm, sweetheart. *Fuck,* you're always so warm. Everywhere."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. *Yes.* What else?"

If he could cry, he would. Kai swallows around nothing, all reflex, thighs parting to let Yeonjun settle between them. "Want -*mm*- I want to know how I feel, too. Inside. If it's- if it's *good."*

He should be heavy, and yet somehow Yeonjun deftly flips him over onto his stomach with an unexpected amount of finesse. Kai obligingly lifts his hips on instinct, eyes wide when, only a moment after his pants have been pulled off and tossed aside, a firm touch urges him up onto his knees, palms braced to the mattress. His shirt follows, puddled on the floor with the rest of their clothes, and Kai stares at the hand that's settled onto his abdomen. "Sit up," Yeonjun murmurs at his neck. "Hold onto the headboard if you need to."

Kai does so, arms reaching forward until he can grab it. His gaze stays on Yeonjun's hand though, a new shiver finding a home in his frame as he watches it glide lower, tentative. *Is he*

. . .

“Can I touch you here, Kai-ya?”

No pet names now, Kai notes, because the question is serious. He’s stopped just short of his goal, pinky finger not quite grazing the base of Kai’s flaccid cock.

“I-” Kai falters. “It’s not- nothing is going to happen if you do,” he reminds. There’s no blood in his body, no nerves. He *can’t.* His voice croaks on the syllables, the helpless sound of it echoing back at him.

“I know.” The assurance is soft, unwavering. Kai shivers again. “I want to, though. I want to touch you, *all of you* this time.”

Oh.

Slowly, so, so slowly, Kai lifts a hand from the headboard. It doesn’t take much, a quiet nudge of his fingers against Yeonjun’s knuckles, but it still staggers him, his stiff shoulders leaning back into Yeonjun’s chest as the man takes his cue. The sight is odd to say the least, the lack of sensation making it more so, the visual of a familiar touch playing with a now almost unfamiliar part of himself disorienting. Kai’s vision grows fuzzy in the corners. “Hyung . . .”

“You’re warm here, too,” Yeonjun whispers. “Baby, *look.* Look at how well you fit me.”

Something almost hot blooms in the pit where his stomach once was when Kai looks, lower lip caught between his teeth as he watches Yeonjun curl his whole hand around him, a thumb rubbing over the slit of his soft tip. Knees shifting on the bed, Kai finds himself spreading his thighs unconsciously, sitting further back onto the other man’s lap. “There you go, darling. See?” A kiss is pressed to the curve of his neck, lingering long enough for Kai to take note of it in his spinning mind. “So good for hyung.”

It’s weird. It probably won’t stop being weird, all things considered, but Kai can’t deny that it stirs an odd, not entirely uncomfortable feeling in him. He can’t look away from it either, eyes drawn back to the theater of Yeonjun palming at him each time he blinks, watching as inquisitive fingers stroke around the base of him. He wants more, wants to *do* more, fuck into that grip and *feel it* and-

Kai doesn’t realize that he’s shivering too hard until Yeonjun nips at the juncture of his shoulder, tone low when he speaks. “Shh, it’s okay, baby. I’ve got you. Hyung’s got you, right?”

The uncertainty is what gets him, in the end, so akin with his own even now, Yeonjun equally as desperate as he is to find a new kind of solace in this. Kai hums on a soft affirmation, a single, sure note.

“Do you want to fuck hyung’s hand?”

Ah.

Kai nods despite himself, the visage of his cock in Yeonjun's fist before him blurring around the seams. "S'stupid," he whispers, choking as soon as it slips out.

"It's not." The denial is quick, the weight of Yeonjun at his back solid, pressing forward, and Kai's hips roll in the vulnerable tide of the encouragement. It doesn't feel like anything, but . . . "It's not stupid," Yeonjun says, lips ghosting along his jaw. "You feel so nice like this, so warm. Go on."

Kai's vision blurs, and so too does the universe around him.

He catalogs it all, the same way he does everything now, every touch and sight and sound preserved and pristine in his mind. But in the moment, as it happens around him, eventually *inside him,* he's too dizzy to care for the details.

They talk, though, hushed and hot, lips against skin, trading affections in lists of what they love.

Kai loves how it looks when Yeonjun fucks him while he's braced against the headboard, the motion of their bodies together, his cock soft, but slick with lube in Yeonjun's palm.

He loves the faint pressure inside him, the mantra exhaled across his ear about how tight he is, how warm.

He loves the imprints of teeth Yeonjun leaves on his skin, there for only a moment to blemish it before they fade, pristine and ready to be marked up all over again.

He loves when Yeonjun rolls him over onto his back later in the night, hands holding his thighs apart as he takes Kai into his mouth and comes onto the sheets with just Kai's hand in his hair.

He loves the warmth that curls in him, fiercely stagnant for more minutes than he can excuse as his imagination, with Yeonjun's forehead against his, arms around him, their hips flush together.

It doesn't build, doesn't peak, but it sticks, minutes burning away with their bodies entwined, every thought in his head Yeonjun, Yeonjun, *Yeonjun.*

"I'm sorry," Yeonjun murmurs in the afterglow, thumbs tracing up Kai's hips, his sides, his ribs. Bold. "I've been wasting so much time, and-"

Yeonjun helping him hide his Molangie from the head boy at the barracks, showing him how to fold it between his shirts in the drawer beneath his bunk so it blends in with the white fabric.

"-you deserve better from me. You deserve *this.* To be touched like I love you, because I *do,* Kai-ya-"

Yeonjun curled up beside him behind an equipment shed, a tablet held between them, old music from a planet long gone softly playing from the screen. He'd been much taller then, chin resting on the top of Kai's head, laughing when Kai complained.

“-I love you *so much.* So much that it *scares the shit out of me.* But I should be better. I *need* to be better. I shouldn’t have let that-”

Yeonjun, too thin, shivering, cheeks sallow as he lay in their barrack's hospital wing, sick and refusing to eat, his first deployment orders on the bedside tray, past due, but his hand clutching Kai’s like a lifeline.

“Yeonjunie.”

They’re so tangled up Kai can’t tell whose hand is whose anymore, a moment of contemplation passing before he manages to lift his and cover Yeonjun’s mouth with a palm.

“Me too."

It's as simple as that, really. Isn't it? They're scared. They're *both* scared, all too aware of what looms both behind and ahead. *Of course* they're scared. Who wouldn't be?

This close, he can see all those haunting signs that have worn themselves into Yeonjun’s being over the last year, tired, temporary lines framing a tired, hesitant smile that curves beneath his hand. Kai pulls it away, eager suddenly to drink in as much as he can while he's sure he has the chance, a kiss pressed to the corner of Yeonjun’s mouth he can’t taste. It doesn't matter though, stubborn fire consuming the ashes that are left of him even now. It doesn't matter, the ghost of the touch is enough.

Yeonjun melts into it, their foreheads bumping together when he eases them apart so he can breathe. There’s more he wants to say, Kai can see it in the shadows beneath his eyes, the dig of teeth against his swollen lower lip, but he cuts that off, too.

"You should rely on me more," Kai whispers.

The slow, befuddled blink Yeonjun gives to that remark says more than Kai thinks it's meant to. "What?"

Safe. Yeonjun should be able to feel safe with him, too.

"You never lean on the rest of us the way we do you," Kai whispers, and with the resurgence of memories to back it, it stings truer than it might have otherwise. He’s not surprised when Yeonjun’s gaze shifts away, just hurt. *"Hyung."*

"I-I'm the oldest-"

"So what?"

Maybe he's being a bit blunt, but at least he's honest, unrepentant when Yeonjun stares at him in muted shock. Kai stares back, waiting.

". . . I like taking care of you."

It's said so softly, hushed in the darkness that seeps through those tiny cracks left between them, that Kai almost doesn’t hear the words at all. He lets them settle when he does though,

cautious as he feels out the cadence of them where they come to rest in his chest. They're not a lie, but there's a formality to the tone he doesn't like, a firm wall. "I know," Kai returns. "I like that too. But it's not fair like this, is it." There's no question there, no room for Yeonjun to protest. "Let us take care of you, too, Yeonjunie-ya. Please? We're going to worry about you either way, so why not lean on us? Me, Taehyun-ah, Soobin, *Beomie."* He doesn't miss the visible flinch that tenses Yeonjun's frame against his. "You put all that weight on your shoulders when we should be sharing it."

"You- you don't need that," Yeonjun mutters, hoarse and hitched at the seams. Kai's hands smooth over his trembling shoulders, down the fragile shiver of his spine, desperately hoping the touch is warm. "You have enough to deal with, Kai, I-"

There's an implication there that churns the stomach Kai doesn't have, and he swallows around it, brows furrowing. "Hyung. You make it sound like you're *too much."*

And oh, there it is, the stark, awful reality, Yeonjun's eyes wide as the quiet accusation of what he thinks of himself sinks in, too spot-on to deny.

Oh.

Part of Kai expects Yeonjun to cry, the sheen in the corners of his expression blatant for a beat before he stubbornly shakes his head, shakes it away, even more tense than before in the tangle of the two of them. He doesn't though, somehow, fingers splayed across Kai's sternum in a poor effort of putting space between them. *"Stop.* Kai, I'm a *mess-"*

"And I'm not?"

"It's different-"

"Is it?"

He's serious, all but deadpan in his tenor. Yeonjun won't meet his gaze, so Kai repeats himself with the same sincerity. "Is it? You said you wanted to be better; better than who, though? Me?"

"No!"

"Then who, hyung? Yourself? You *can't.* Pushing yourself so hard like that, until you *break,* just because you're trying to be *better,* what's the point?"

The sentences stumble as they're built, a mirror of how scared he is just to finally speak them to life. But Kai doesn't loosen the circle of his arms, doesn't let go when Yeonjun looks away.

"Can't we just both be a mess? You and me? You and *Beomgyu?* All of us? What would be wrong with that? I want- *I want* you to tell me when you're scared, Yeonjunie-ya. I want you to find me when you're sad. *That's* what would be better. Not . . . Not this. Not you, all by yourself."

It's built up, bricks and morter stacked upon each other for years, Kai thinks miserably as he watches Yeonjun's face scrunch up, laugh lines bending into anguish, folding over towards

relief. These aren't burdens that grew in his absence, not entirely at least. They've had time to fester, the chain of shouldered responsibility rusted through and ready to snap.

So it does.

"Tell me," Kai begs, "when you're scared. *Tell me."*

Yeonjun's breath tears into a sob, and Kai's vision flickers at the corners as he catches him in that close proximity of their tangled bodies, never having strayed very far.

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Being informally separated *(defected)* from the resistance hasn't done much to change the monotonous routine of getting ready for mission deployment.

Sure, there's no longer an official checklist to follow, no endless lines of procedures that have more politeness than purpose, but that doesn't make the process itself all that different. The lists are their own now, more or less the same, just like everything else; their ships, their uniforms, the only thing that's different, really, is *them.*

And it shows, Kai thinks, the old habits of moaning and groaning their way through standard protocols missing as they do last minute inspections and shuffle into branded hazard suits.

There aren't any jokes traded while Beomgyu and Yeonjun carry out their usual walkthrough of The Ursa Minor before launch, and Soobin doesn't have to hustle everyone to stay on task, the hands he's holding his tablet with where he stands to the side of the hanger, overseeing it all, so white-knuckled that Kai has no idea how the screen hasn't cracked. The only sense of normalcy is in how much Kai fumbles to put his suit on, baffled as always by the seals long before he even tries.

"I don't even understand why I have to wear one," he mutters to Taehyun, who is oh so graciously helping him fit the boots on over his *other* boots. Look, safety and efficiency are not synonyms. "Even if the planet is inhospitable for humans, I'm not *human,* so . . ."

"You can still be a walking contagion magnet," Taehyun reminds in an exasperated drawl.

"That's what the decontamination showers are for."

He gets a swat to his knee for that, an even more useless reprimand than it was when he could still feel it. "Do you *really* want to go down there and be an active test subject for what can and can't kill you?"

Well, when you put it that way.

Despite the grim reality that lies ahead, Kai is glad to see that Taehyun at least seems to be in somewhat good spirits. There's an undeniable lightness to his movements as he finishes stuffing Kai into his suit to the waist, an ease to each breath that's enviable. Whatever they'll be facing, Taehyun is clearly comfortable with the state of what they're leaving behind.
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Kai touches a thumb to a purpled patch of skin half hidden under the collar of the other man's uniform, still fresh. He'd wondered, after Yeonjun's wayward remark about sending Taehyun off to fetch him, why he hadn't returned. "I hope you let him sleep a little," he hums when Taehyun casts him a curious glance at the touch. "He does have to fly us to the surface in one piece, you know."

The snort Taehyun gives to that is wry, but his eyes are fond when he averts them to fiddle with the suit's waistband. "I don't need a lecture from *you.* His thighs looked like a Valterniaran decapodiforme molested him."

"You're welcome?"

Rolling his eyes, Taehyun straightens up, a scolding pat to Kai's side making him fix his posture too so the rest of the suit can be pulled over his shoulders. They're toe to toe now, Taehyun's fingers steady as they close the seal around the base of his throat. "It was good though," he says then, suddenly serious. "It wasn't just . . . We *talked,* mostly. And we needed that. I . . . It's been so long, and I had *so much* to say."

It's odd, in a way, the bubble of elation and unabashed *joy* Kai feels rise in his chest from nothing except second hand accounts of love so visceral it's almost as if it were all his own. The ache of it is pleasant, deep, and he huffs on the happy mimic of a sigh when he bonks his forehead against Taehyun's for attention. "I'm glad you had that time," he confesses softly when their eyes meet.

And he's glad they have this, too, the two of them on the precipice of the unknown, as clinical as it might seem to an outside observer. Taehyun isn't helping him into his suit because he *has* to.

He hesitates before he does it, the uncertain curl of Taehyun's mouth stalling him for a moment. Time is so fleeting, though, and Kai is loathe to waste much more of it.

The kiss itself is short, and chaste even where Taehyun is concerned, but Kai leans into the pressure of it while he can, leaves it heavy with promise. Taehyun's gaze is stunned when he pulls away.

"What was that for?"

Kai shrugs. "Can't kiss you once the helmet is on."

It takes awhile longer for them to be ready, Yeonjun fussing over The Ursa Minor's status checks and the burn marks from their last venture on her hull for nearly another hour. He's worried, Kai knows. They all know, Yeonjun's anxiety reflected in how no one speaks up to stop him, not even Beomgyu, who quietly nods along to every concern at his side, the space between them a little smaller than it has been for awhile. Eventually though, there's nothing left to fuss about, no more arbitrary checks to run, no new reminders for a stone-faced Soobin to dole out while they listen.

They're ready.

Kai is the last to board, the fighter's engines already humming low when he steps onto the ramp up to the cockpit, Taehyun and Beomgyu strapped into their seats inside. His head is full of thoughts, stats, facts based on the scans they've done from above. The planet doesn't rotate, and the icy features of its dark side has made it difficult for them to narrow down the exact coordinates for the distress signal's origin. Flying in low will help, but he's concerned about what the backdraft of the ship might stir up from the surface, especially with their initial readings about it being inhospitable. Their best course would probably be to land as close to the signal as possible, and establish a search perimeter with handheld devices. If it's within five kilometers or less, they should be able to-

"Wait!"

A hand catches his, skin to the bumpy texture of the hazard suit's palm, and Kai turns, startled, the breath he doesn't have caught in his throat as a familiar little cube is pressed into his grip. Soobin's fingers tremble around his own. "It's- I fixed it. The portable Endolphin. You should take her with you. *She's yours."*

He steps back, as abrupt as he'd reached out, far enough that The Ursa Minor's door is able to begin rising up without his weight to delay it.

It's so sudden. *It's too sudden.* Kai doesn't know what to say. *What to do.* How to act. He doesn't even think he's standing right, frozen in place as the door rises, rises, the barest gap left to see through as he watches Soobin's stiff, neutral stare crumple, hands lifting to cup around his mouth and call out over The Ursa Minor's engines roaring to life.

"I can't believe you kissed Beomgyu-ya first."

"Oh? Are you jealous?"

*" **Yes.** You're such a brat. We've been together since we were literal babies, you know I've always . . ."*

"Kai-ya!"

Kai strains to hear him, over the rush of memory in his own head, the thrum of the fighter, the hiss of the airlock door starting to close another barrier between them, Endolphin's portable core clutched tightly to his chest.

"Kai-ya! *Be safe!"*

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment if you enjoyed the chapter! Your support means the world to me and it's why I keep writing!

Next up: so much fucking scifi. No horny, only SPACESHIPS.

For WIPs of fics and other nonsense, hmu on Twitter @cat_macbeth! I also host a small TxT discord server for fanfic fans you can get info on via dm!

Thank you for reading!

PS: have you read Sonder yet (ミዕᆽዕミ)

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